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Visible Women

Tales of age, gender and in/visibility

Christine Jennifer Bell

**A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol
in accordance with the requirements of the degree of Doctorate of Education
in the Faculty of Social Science, Graduate School of Education**

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**TEXT BOUND INTO
THE SPINE**

Abstract

This is a reflective, questioning, subjective, self-indulgent and often moving narrative and poetic exploration of the experiences of women growing older and not disappearing.

Questions posed – and not necessarily answered – include: What is behind the stories of older women becoming invisible and disregarded? How true are they? Where do they come from? What do they mean – to women and ‘society’? How might they be challenged? What other stories can be told?

Starting with a search for the anecdotal and mythical ‘invisible woman’, the writer’s own story is woven into, and becomes part of, the journey. This initially takes us through the landscape of feminist and poststructuralist theory, existentialism, auto/biography, journalism, fictional writing, art, films, poetry, the internet and much more. In examining the bones of the tales of invisibility, the writer is motivated by indignation as much as curiosity.

The major part of this work is the poetic representation of the thoughts and lives of eight older women (between 50 and 70) drawn from the lengthy individual and group email correspondence between the writer and her co-researchers. Each of us is named and pictured. Our conclusion is to call ourselves ‘The Visibles’.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original, except where indicated by special reference in the text, and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other academic award. Work done in collaboration with others is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: Christine Bell..... DATE: 26 February 2010.....

Dedication

This is dedicated to my mother, Dora Bell,
who did not have the chance to become an 'older woman'.

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt and grateful thanks go to my seven wonderfully visible co-researchers, Alison, Cindy, Jane, Lynn, Marie, Pat and Sara. Without them this work would not have been possible and they all contributed generously with their time, energy, openness, trust and humour.

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Examining the bones

*Reciter of bones, lover of poems –
memory has always been my long suit.*

(Itani 2008: 280)

Why this exploration?

*Rather than a complete invisibility of women
it is the distortion in their visibility
and the assumption of their derived identity and status ...
which ... occupy the attention ...*

(Dube et al, 1986: xxiv)

There are many anecdotal stories about older women becoming invisible – often based on the experiences of well-known and apparently very visible women. Germaine Greer, Doris Lessing, Dorothy Rowe – whose writing and thinking I respect and admire – are three of those whose stories and statements I explore further in another section.

Aged 67 at the start of writing my way into this strange thing called a ‘dissertation’, I have been reflecting on my membership of a group which I didn’t ask to join, but became eligible for anyway. We’re called ‘older women’ – and sometimes much less polite things. Whilst disliking the name-calling, I have been (mostly) sanguine about passing the various age milestones which apparently bring dismay for some in our ‘group’. I am not, however, happy with the idea of quietly disappearing as I move from the world of relatively visible, self-employed paid work into a way of living that is very different but potentially at least as interesting - if considerably poorer financially.

“We study things that trouble or intrigue us, beginning from our own subjective standpoints” (Hertz, 1997: xvii). What motivated me to start this exploration was indignation at the apparent acceptance that we have become ‘The Invisibles’. Nobody sees us any more – or so we are told. My own experience, and that of other older women I know, does not support this hypothesis and I decided to try and find out what’s going on.

My reflections on the questions around the visibility or invisibility of older women evolved as I have used *“writing to think”* (St. Pierre, 2005: 970), both in my correspondence with my co-researchers and in re-writing these ‘beginning’ sections many times. As I listened and read and pondered on this phenomenon –

and as the correspondence with my co-researchers developed – my initial indignation began to shift into curiosity about the differing meanings of ‘invisibility’, both to those who experience it and those (sometimes one and the same) who use it as a label for all of us. It can seem both negative *and* positive, sometimes in the same paragraph.

The 80 year old (fictional) woman in Frances Itani’s *Remembering the Bones*, is recalling and re-telling her life, as she lies at the foot of a ravine, alone and badly injured after a car accident:

Women my age are invisible. When we reach our sixties, we’re discounted, sidelined. Even before that ... But it’s our world, too. We live in it and we are many (2008: 165).

It is indeed *our world, too* – and we have tales to tell that may well include loss of various kinds as we get older, but are about much more than that. Julia Kristeva speaks of the “*need to find a discourse that can answer the question: ‘who are you?’ and the ‘memory that underlies narrative’*” (2001: 15, 17). As older women, there are things we know and remember which may interest and surprise; we may sometimes be boring or even wrong (though as Diana Athill (2009: 91) says: “... *being old doesn’t necessarily make one wrong*”) but we also have experience and knowledge, insight and humour.

This is, of course, a political and philosophical, as well as a personal, issue and there is some ‘deconstructing’ of old ideas and stories to be done (see Derrida, 1973) alongside exploring new possibilities.

*Deconstruction is
theory laughing at itself
Deconstruction is
power’s banana skin*

(Stronach, 2002: 302)

There are questions around power and where it lies, alongside women’s perceptions of being ‘positioned’ as invisible and powerless. Michel Foucault asks: “*Do we need a theory of power?*” (Faubion, 2001: 327) and seems to be suggesting that we need to try and get to a different understanding of how we are (or feel we are) ‘positioned’ by others (Davies & Harre, 1990; Drewery, 2005).

Leela Dube tells us that, in order to do so, we must get away from *“the socialization of women with male models of how to perceive the world”* (Dube et al, 1986: xiv).

From a feminist perspective, Patti Lather suggests using *“getting lost as a methodology”* (2007: 3), which very much appeals to me; not trying to come up with the answer to an inquiry; allowing for ‘not knowing’. As I understand feminist and poststructuralist philosophies, they are in part a critique of so-called scientific objectivity (see later section on ‘Self-indulgence’) but at least as importantly make clear the need to pay attention to an ethical and political awareness of our positions of power and privileges.

There are important questions around status – including culture, class, gender, health and wealth - which I have borne in mind whilst writing and which have been specifically mentioned by some of my co-researchers. My main focus here is that there should be a choice; for older women to be seen and heard when we choose to be – not at the expense of other ‘groups’ but deserving of equal attention and respect. I don’t want us to feel *discounted and sidelined*, neither hoping nor expecting to be noticed.

So ... what questions would we like to ask or be asked? What happens when/if we talk about it amongst ourselves? How do we contribute to our own experiences – positive and negative - of being older women? What stories do we have to tell, rather than have told for us? These are the ‘bones’ I and my co-researchers have been examining.

*We need to look into women’s lives ...
and emphasise women’s perceptions and subjective experiences.*
(Dube et al, 1986: xii)

My story – part one: the ‘magic summer’

I need to see myself ... and I never have.

(Pilar, in ‘Take my eyes’, 2003)

As part of making sense of my need to set out on this exploration, I want to write myself into this text. Where to start? In my early handwritten notes:

*... realise that I need to explore some definitions of **visible and invisible**.*

What do these words mean – to me – to the women I’ll be researching with – to others?

The importance of being visible to oneself – I think that has been my starting point for all this work, from my magic summer onwards.

How do we do this? Or not do it?

*Because being visible to me is how I now maintain my sense of myself as mattering – at least most of the time – so as not to conform to the childhood rules of **“DON’T”**.*

(Personal journal, 7 September 2007)

Looking at these journal notes scattered like a ‘spidergram’ across the page, I notice the different coloured inks used. I have used colour in writing in this way for a long time but am realising (not for the first time) how very **VISIBLE** it makes what I’m telling myself.

Watching the film ‘Take my eyes’ (2003) on television some months ago, I re-experienced old feelings of shame as Pilar is regularly humiliated by her husband while she continues to try and convince herself that he really loves her and will change. She finally leaves him for good, acknowledging that she must go because: “*I need to see myself ... and I never have.*” It brought back memories that I would prefer to forget, but which are all too easily recalled.

Some memories appear to be more accessible than others.
(Crawford et al, 1992: 9)

My 'magic summer' and the months preceding and following remain as powerful, colourful, accessible images, partly at least because of the way they have become a tale that I have told and re-told myself many times. This story is part of who I now am and how I see myself.

My fiftieth year began badly – not so much to do with age as having experienced a series of losses. Four close family deaths within a short period, all bringing up the usual mix of grief, anger and unresolved difficulties, along with memories of the early death of my mother; the relationship with my on-again/off-again partner finally ending very stormily; my ex-husband beginning his descent into alcohol-induced dementia, and my greatly loved son depressed and unable to decide what he wanted to do with himself after leaving school. Even though I felt like a bad mother (nothing new there), it was a relief when he decided to go travelling and I had only myself to take care of. I presented my usual active, competent front to the world, whilst barely able to crawl around in a grey fog of hopelessness at home.

The director of the centre where I managed volunteer projects said to me one day: "Don't you think it's time you got really angry?" I was amazed that she'd noticed – but shortly afterwards, in a surge of energy brought on (at last) by rage, gave in my notice, put my house up for sale and paid off my mortgage. I bought a much smaller, cheaper house in a small Bastide town in the Dordogne where I had French friends, near where we had lived as a family on a smallholding some years before. On a beautiful, sunny June morning I set off in a small, blue Renault van with a sleeping bag, my bike, a portable typewriter and some clothes, heading south on a high after my months of depression.

Almost as soon as I arrived, my euphoria began to dissipate. *What on earth have I done? No income, a leaky, draughty, filthy, barely habitable house ... actually, it's a bit like the first time living in France, except that now there's no partner or child. Ah, that's it – nobody is depending on me. I'm not responsible for anybody but myself – and I don't think I like it. Nobody needs me.*

At least the house needed attention. After a few very hot days of frantic cleaning, I was on my knees scrubbing the floor with front and back doors wide open to let in any possible breath of air. One of my neighbours paused in the narrow street on her way past and – after the usual *“Bonjour, madame”* and *“Qu’est qu’il fait chaud!”* - asked (with a smile) what the hurry was.

“You told us you were here for a few months” she said. *“It’s a lovely day. Can’t the cleaning wait for a bit?”*

And of course, it could ...
wait, that is ...
and as I stopped doing,
I started slowing down ...

In the spaces created by waiting, strange things started to happen. I began to sleep better – eventually to sleep right through the night (something I have almost never done, before or since). I went to bed early - and woke early - often emerging in time to see the moon disappearing, flushed pink as it caught the first rays of the sun. Most mornings, before breakfast, I got on my bike and did a circuit of the hill road above the town, ending with an exhilarating downhill swoop, singing loudly all the way home. To cool down at the end of the hot afternoons, I swam in the slightly muddy *plan d’eau* – when the anglers had gone and the swallows were swooping and dipping. Afterwards, I would sit in my small patch of garden, with a huge salad and a glass of wine and watch the sun go down behind the hills opposite.

I started writing – and told my friendly but curious neighbours that I was a writer. Soon everybody in the small town seemed to know me as *‘l’écrivain anglaise’*, which apparently excused my strange behaviour, particularly the lack of a television or radio. When not audibly battering my portable typewriter, I was no longer just sitting and looking, or wandering about the place - I was a writer, ‘thinking’.

... a thing can be true, but not true, but true nonetheless.
(Atwood, 2008: 4)

I became a watcher, too, and could sit for hours in the shade of my back porch on the edge of the old ramparts, just looking ... down into the valley and at the wooded slopes beyond, noticing the shifting colours and shapes, the surrounding bowl of hills against the sky as the light changed. In the evening I lay on the sloping, sun-warmed stone wall of the garden and watched the stars appear in an almost black sky. It felt magical - like being a child again but without anybody to tell me I should be doing something else.

To help fund my time there, I'd arranged to do some chamber-maiding for friends who ran a *chambres d'hote*. Initially I was pleased to have something to do and people to see. As I began to slow down, I became more and more reluctant to spend time with anybody but myself. In spending time with myself, with no other distractions, I began to learn something that seems very obvious now, but was then like a revelation – the things that I was thinking and doing were valid and had an existence *even though nobody else knew about them*. If I alone knew, that was enough. How amazing!

My fiftieth birthday came in September, towards the end of my magic summer. After some extremely hot, dry weather, there was a particularly violent Dordogne thunderstorm which woke me in the night. I went out to watch the display, as the sky flickered and shimmered, then was split apart with ferocious streaks of brilliant, almost blinding light. The distant rumble grew into violent crumping explosions, shaking the ground like a battle approaching. And then, at last, the rain. I was born (so I'm told) at around 2.00 a.m. and, standing just inside the cover of my back porch while the rain sheeted down and the storm passed slowly and dramatically overhead, I exulted in what felt like a special birthday gift – a display just for me.

The following day was all mine – apart from a meal with friends in the evening. Driving off early in the cool of the post-storm morning to Perigueux, elegant medieval city, I spent the day wandering the streets and shops and galleries of the old town. After a spectacular ice-cream lunch (with sparklers and the female staff singing '*Bonne anniversaire*'), I sat and ate little cakes in the *patisserie*, feeling

visible yet somehow incognito, almost French and delighted with myself. It was the best birthday I've ever had. I loved being seen to be 50 and OK.



Is the story of my magic summer true? Well, I think it is. It's how I remember it and have retold it.

I amount to my own story. I am what I am.

(Itani, 2008: 281)

In search of 'The Invisible Woman'

*If only she would become visible ...
then I could catch her
and impress upon her
the truth of the situation.*

(Enright, 2008a: 5)

Searching through the literature, I did not initially discover much in the way of theory or academic texts about this mythical creature. But once started on the journey, I began to pick up references almost every day in newspapers, journals, on radio and television, in films and books, on the internet – almost all containing the words 'old(er)' and 'invisible women'.

When we say 'older', what do we even mean any more? It probably used to be anyone over 60, but now it seems to be applied to women over 40.

(Suzanne Moore, in Saner, 2010: 18)

Emine Saner quotes Anna Ford: "*How many [women] presenters do you know on television who are over the age of 60?*". And goes on to say:

... glancing at our visual culture – television, films, billboards – it can seem that, with a few notable exceptions ... older women have ceased to exist.
(Saner, 2010: 18).

In her autobiography *Just Me*, Sheila Hancock is quoted as saying: "*It is a proven fact that after 50 women do dissolve ... I neither expect nor hope to be noticed*" (Bakewell, 2008: 8). A 'proven fact'? Michele Hanson, on the other hand, writes about the delights and freedoms of being in her sixties and says of a friend who complains about it:

She sees empty, I see full ... we're in a sort of retro-revolution ... So why gripe about invisibility? It means freedom ... This invisibility is just a win-win situation... (2009: 16/17).

Dorothy Rowe, a psychologist whose work I respect and admire, is a regular interviewee on BBC radio programmes about issues which include the problems of the ageing population in this country. Now in her seventies, she talks about the 'invisibility' of older people, often referring to *Time on our Side* (1994), written when she was in her sixties. In this book she writes with her usual clarity and humour of

living with our fear of ageing and tells stories of incidents that illustrate her own experience of no longer being seen.

She describes the move from childhood (when she *"longed to become invisible"* to avoid parental criticism) to very visible young womanhood: *"Men looked, and wanted a response from me. Much as I wanted to be loved and admired I found the endless pressure from men wearying and irritating"* (Rowe, 1994: 35). As she grew older, however:

It took me a while to realise that I was becoming invisible. Now I am completely invisible, except to a few wise folk who can actually see me (1994: 35).

She adds that sometimes invisibility is useful: *"... for someone whose daily delight is observing people being invisible is just marvellous. What a lot I learn about people when they don't realise I'm watching and listening!"* (1994: 36).

Dorothy Rowe goes on to say, reflectively:

I don't feel myself to be invisible. When I look in the mirror I see someone there. This is just another example of how we are always aware of two sets of perceptions – how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive other people's perceptions of us (1994: 37).

The negative connotations of 'invisibility' seem to be particularly painful for women *"whose self-worth rests primarily in appearance and sexual desirability"* and for whom *"passing fifty is like taking the veil ... suddenly they feel invisible"* (Gail Sheehy, in Stensrude, 1995: 2).

Appearance and desirability are important to Nobel Literature Prize winner Doris Lessing, who has often spoken in interviews about the difficulty of being an older woman no longer getting male attention. The main characters in two of her novels – *The Summer Before the Dark* and *Love, again* – are women growing older who have been used to attention and feel themselves invisible when this ceases.

She had to know at last, that all her life she had been held upright by an invisible fluid, the notice of other people. But the fluid had drained away. (Lessing, 1983: 180)

In an interview for a book *On Women Turning 70*, Doris Lessing tells about her own experience:

The invisibility thing began to happen to me along about my fifties, when I suddenly became aware that men were no longer noticing me.
(Caremark, 2001: 1).

Being intelligent, well-known, highly regarded and rewarded, and published all over the world, does not seem to compensate for no longer being 'noticed' by men. But, as with Dorothy Rowe, there are apparently some advantages to being invisible:

Then, when we get really old, we can be invisible to anyone – apart from people who know us, of course. I'm not necessarily saying this is a bad thing. It's quite interesting not to be noticed, because you can listen very attentively. (Lessing, in Caremark, 2001: 1).

In her online article, Janice Stensrude (1995: 1) cites an address by Carolyn Heilbrun as "*my introduction to the concept of 'the invisible woman', the failure of the ageing woman to so easily capture the attention of men*".

Germaine Greer claims that she isn't interested in being noticed by men. Although I often want to throw things at the television when she is holding forth – at length and on almost any subject – she is consistently well-informed, intelligent, often self-deprecating and usually very funny. In her book about women, ageing and the menopause, *The Change* (1992), she puts forward witty and cogent arguments as to why women should feel liberated by the arrival of the menopause rather than believing it to be the end of their useful life. It is a passionate and fascinating work:

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate that women are at least as interesting as men, and that ageing women are at least as interesting as younger women (Greer, 1992: 35).

She tells of Mary Wollstonecraft's anger (in 1792) at a male writer who wondered what business women over forty had in the world – and asks:

What if we, the horde of women of fifty, cannot see what business we have in the world? Most of us are no longer sought as lovers, as wives, as mothers, or even as workers, unless there is a conspicuous dearth in our profession, and then only until we are sixty. We are supposed to mind our own business; if we do this we need to find a business of our own (Greer, 1992: 24).

She too, however, makes generalised statements about the importance of appearance:

Sooner or later the middle-aged woman becomes aware of a change in the attitude of other people towards her. She can no longer trade on her appearance, something which she has done unconsciously all her life (Greer, 1992: 7).

... and complains that even *"in fiction, whether written by men or by women, middle-aged women are virtually invisible"* (1992: 22). As I can immediately go to my bookshelves and pull out a large number of books by and about middle-aged (and even older) women, I can only assume that there has been a revolution in publishing since 1992.

As Hilary Mantel says, wondering why she had left the women out of the 1979 draft of her novel about the French Revolution (published 1992):

How had I failed to notice that women hold up half the sky?... Even in the early 90s, much of the material we now have about revolutionary women was not generally available – or rather, it was there, but we weren't seeing it (Mantel, 2008: 15).

And one last gripe - why is it deemed such a compliment to be told that we look younger than we are, or that we don't look our age? It feels like yet another way of making ageing shameful and not fit to be seen. I'm with Nora Ephron in her riposte: *"I'm way past Age Shame, if I ever had it. I'm just happy to be here at all"* (2007: 201).

Maybe all this writing by women about 'the invisible woman' is just another way of being visible?

*... maybe they just don't see the women,
even when the women are right in front of them.*
(Pollitt, 2005: 3)

There are positive aspects of being a frightening old woman.

*Though the old woman is both feared and reviled,
she need not take the intolerance of others to heart,
for women over fifty already form one of the largest groups
in the population structure of the western world.*

*As long as they like themselves,
they will not be an oppressed minority.*

*In order to like themselves,
they must reject trivialisation by others
of who and what they are.*

*A grown woman
should not have to masquerade as a girl
in order to remain in the land of the living.*

(Germaine Greer, 1992: 2)

On writing

When I write

*I do nothing on purpose,
except stop.*

(Cixous, 2005: 191)

On writing – and not writing

*Why does a writer have to divert herself,
pray for interruptions or devise them herself? ...
You don't hear of accountants who can't open a spread-sheet,
or farmers who take against fields ...
Fear of commitment lies behind the fear of writing ...
What is worst, what is most wretched,
is being almost ready to write.*

(Mantel, 2009a: 13)

I care about writing; I want to do it, I really do ... and yet ... so many things can get in the way of the finished 'piece', so many different ways of procrastinating. Then there is the worry of never being able to get it right, maybe never find that *"talk that sings"* (Bird, 2004: ix), the language that will really convey what I'm thinking and feeling ... not just *well enough*, of course, but so as to be the perfect conduit for my mental images, excitement, reflective silences. I want you, the reader, to care about what I'm saying – not in the same way I do, maybe, but care nevertheless. Quite a tall order.

Add to that the desire to be wonderfully creative ... different ... to produce something which will blow your proverbial socks off. Perhaps I just need to get on with it rather than trying to impress you.

*Am I only visible
if I get it right?*
(Personal journal, 17 April 2008)

Maybe Anne Enright is right:

There is so much guff talked about creativity, and the more of this guff you talk, the more you are in danger of becoming blocked. 'Block' is like a panic attack – the minute you describe it, you have it: the word and the experience are the same (2009: 13).

There are so many inspirational, informative, funny and relevant thoughts about writing (gathered from my promiscuous reading across fiction, newspaper and internet articles and columns, academic journals, theoretical texts) that I could fill this space with them. I have various 'writing mentors' whose writing inspires me, including my supervisor; almost all of them are women and most of them I've never met. They include Hilary Mantel and Anne Enright, whose books are a curiously

painful delight to read (pleasure mixed with envy). They have both been stimulating contributors to the *Author, author* column in the *Guardian Review*, with their entertaining, insightful and informative reflections on writing.

Writing has always been an important part of my life - and when young, because I loved doing it and could apparently do it well, assumed it was how I would earn my living, before discovering this was a great deal harder than imagined. Letter writing, however, was still a normal, regular activity as I grew up. It was how people kept in touch.

As a child, I enjoyed writing (and receiving) many letters each week. I wrote to friends as well as family, because we moved quite often – and as family members were often far away, sometimes the letters were to people (including my father) who I didn't see for years on end. As an adult, I continued the family tradition of travel and letter-writing.

This has been a wonderfully different experience of inquiry; writing to and fro with my seven co-researchers has been an absolute joy. Far from procrastinating, I have looked forward to writing the letters and looked forward even more to receiving the responses.

Now all I have to do, I suppose, is pretend that I'm just writing a very, very long letter.

*Writing is learned from the inside out.
Writing is a discipline and, as with any discipline,
whether spiritual or physical, the doing is everything.
No one can do it for you.*

(Enright, 2008b: 15)

Self-indulgence – or just another way of reflecting?

*In thinking about self-indulgence,
I was particularly drawn to feminist postmodern critiques
that called for more self-reflexive social science ...
These analyses supported my view
that the abstract, disembodied voice of
traditional academic discourse was a fiction ...*
(Mykhalovskiy, 1997: 232)

In the proposal for this dissertation, my criteria included: *“allowing subjectivity and self-indulgence – i.e. giving weight to my own and other women’s individual experiences through telling our stories”*. ‘Self-indulgent’ is the term sometimes used in the academic world to dismiss biographical narrative writing.

It’s as if reflecting on your own experience, or making yourself visible when exploring other people’s, in some way invalidates any hope of your work being taken seriously.

*Why not use different terms,
such as self-knowing,
self-respectful, self-sacrificing,
or self-luminous?*
(Sparkes, 2002: 210)

My initial indignant reaction to those dismissive voices is to ask: What could be more self-indulgent (and worse, boring) than academics so often writing – apparently – only for each other? This point has already been made very effectively (and interestingly) elsewhere (Bochner, 2000; Mykhalovskiy, 1997; Richardson, 1997).

In fact, I believe it is much more demanding – and dare I say it, even more rigorous – *not* to hide behind the anonymity of the academic researcher. In putting myself and my own story clearly in view, alongside those of my co-researchers, I am unable to become the *“disembodied voice”* that analyses, interprets and draws conclusions about the lives and experiences of others. I am not, of course, alone in believing this (Bloom, 1998; Bochner, 2000; Davies & Gannon, 2006; Hen Co-op,

1993; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Speedy, 2004; and many other feminist and poststructuralist voices).

Zig-zagging my way around the doctoral track for the past few years, sometimes finding it hard to get started, I felt greatly supported by my supervisor and other tutors in my quest to find creative ways of 'breaking the rules' (my label) in academic writing (Bond, 2002; Reed 2006; Speedy, 2005a,b).

In *The Tacit Dimension*, Michael Polanyi's wonderfully laconic opening sentence is: "Some of you may know that I turned to philosophy as an afterthought to my career as a scientist" (1967: 3).

How about that? Becoming a philosopher as an afterthought ...

His reasons for turning to philosophy included coming to the realisation that scientific claims to reach valid conclusions based only on facts were not absolutely true. What he calls the "*leap to discovery*" in research comes about through the choices we make about what to believe, what interpretation to put on what we are inquiring into; " ... *to some degree, we shape all knowledge in the way we know it*" (Polanyi, 1967: 77).

I am interested in how our own stories are constructed through the multitude of subjective ways in which we all 'know' and shape our knowledge. Rosi Braidotti, writing about 'non-unitary subjectivity', says for her it means "*a nomadic, dispersed, fragmented vision, which is nonetheless functional, coherent and accountable, mostly because it is embedded and embodied*" (2006: 4).

It seems to me that claiming subjectivity – rather than pretending to be objective – could be seen as an essential to good research. It is simply making visible what is actually going on. And if writing about oneself can become self-indulgent, in that it's too self-absorbed or badly written (which, of course, happens), then it must be seen as part of the writerly task not to let this happen - to remember Laurel

Richardson's strictures that "*writing matters*" (1997: 87) and we must not be boring if we want to be read.

I have read a great many autobiographical books and auto-ethnographic texts over the last few years, partly as academic research (and obligation) but mostly for pleasure and/or information. My bibliography could have been at least twice as long if I'd decided to reference them all – but that might have seemed too self-indulgent even for me. I have occasionally been bored or critical, or even embarrassed, but have perhaps learned from those less positive experiences about *how* and *why* to shine the research light in order to illuminate the stories my co-researchers and I would like you to see.

One of the books I was surprised to enjoy was Diana Athill's memoir, *Somewhere Towards the End*. Writing in her ninetieth year, she recognises the privileged position she was born into, rejecting what she calls the "*tribal complacency*" of her family which was "*based on wicked nonsense*" (2009: 179). The most interesting part of it for me was not the sexual and other revelations, but the way she is using the stories about herself to describe how she 'became' a writer *in order* to tell the stories; letting her readers know what it's like for *her* becoming an older woman, as she experiences changing relationships with friends and family, sexual partners, work, home, religion, reading habits, gardening, clothing ...every part of her life.

I believed, and still believe, that there is no point in describing experience unless one tries to get it as near to being what it really was as you can make it, but that belief does come into conflict with a central teaching in my upbringing: Do Not Think Yourself Important (Athill, 2009: 148).

That conflict with upbringing is one I know well – and by writing myself into this text I am consciously and deliberately Thinking Myself Important. In doing so I recognise my privileged position as a white, middle-class woman in being able to do this, knowing that my own and my co-researchers' experiences and stories are just that ... our stories. I hope that, at the very least, it will be an interesting read.

I have so much enjoyed this way of researching – writing to and fro with the seven other women over many months – that it has been difficult to move into starting the next part of the journey. It used to be called ‘writing up’ but actually, for me, feels more like writing down. I am not at all sure where it will take me – or my readers – but my hope is that this ‘gathering’ of stories, memories, ideas, images and poetry will offer a space for reflection on aspects of the lives of eight ‘older women’ and why we matter.

Many women’s personal narratives unfold within the framework of an apparent acceptance of social norms and expectations but nevertheless describe strategies and activities that challenge these same norms.

(Personal Narratives Group, 1989: 7)

My story – part two: the visible line

*When someone dies, we exist for years on a thin line,
a wire stretched tight between remembering and forgetting.
When something touches that wire and makes it vibrate,
that's a ghost.*

(Mantel, 2007: 4)

My mother, who died aged 40, has been often on my mind whilst researching and writing. I now live again in the small Dorset town where she died and is buried. She never got to be an 'older woman' (by my criteria) and, in conversations with her as I sit on the edge of her grave, I get vibrations along that 'wire stretched tight' of distant amusement at the whole notion of a group of women sending reflective letters to each other about how visible or invisible they feel. Yet despite that faint, ghostly smile – and feeling very young again as I experience it – I also get the sense of "Good for you!"

Beginning my journal for this exploration many months ago, I noted:

Thinking about myself – and the seven other women ... who've agreed to be part of this – it has occurred to me that we are not just maintaining/ sustaining our own visibility when we tell our stories, but also carrying on this role ... on behalf of our mothers and grandmothers, aunts and other ancestors.

My own stories involve them, sometimes directly ... or indirectly ... there would be no 'My Story' without them.

(Personal journal, 13 August 2007)

and then a few weeks later:

Nearing my 66th birthday. Do I mind? Is it significant? The answer to both seems to be 'No'. And yet ... simply asking myself the questions may mean that I do mind – at least a little – and that it does feel significant, even if not much.

(Personal journal, 7 September 2007)



My grandmother (King)



Dora – my mother (aged 24)



Dora and me (aged 3)

Writing to be heard

I am a woman writing.

(Richardson, 1997: 4)

Laurel Richardson is my lode star and heroine of writing about academic writing (as may be gathered by the number of times she is referenced in this work). In the above quote, she is musing on her role as a woman in a male academic world, learning to construct a way of writing differently;

“contextualizing and personalizing ... re-visioning my life and work ... Joining the men’s team, competing on their playing field ... [does] not enhance my work or my life” (1997: 3,4).

I like my form of writing to 'tell', 'signal', 'display', 'be' what it claims to talk about, but I also believe texts should be accessible.

(Richardson, 1997: 5)

Some years ago, on the first residential weekend of a training course in therapeutic supervision, one of the other women participants and I discovered (over a late night drink) that we had both once worked in journalism and had a passion for the written word from an early age.

I told her
after a drink (or two)
about writing
my autobiography
at the age of six
after the death of my mother.

She listened, seriously,
sipping her whisky,
looked at me and said
“Why do you write?”

Nobody had asked me that before!

The answer surprised me.

"To be heard", I said.

I have always turned to writing, especially when overwhelmed by feelings – grief, anger, love, joy. It seemed like a safe way of expressing the emotions that were apparently unacceptable to those around me. Nobody seemed to be listening but me. When I began practising as a psychotherapist and counsellor, becoming a professional listener, I discovered how to offer writing as well as talking as "*a powerful therapeutic technique*" (Wright, 2004: 12).

Diana Athill describes discovering her own ability to write as an older woman, after a lifetime of encouraging and editing other people's work. She says that the main purpose of writing books was to get rid of "*what was accumulating in the unconscious part of my mind, and the purpose of that accumulation, which I hadn't known I needed, was healing ... I plunged straight into 'writing them out', as what seemed to me the natural and certain way of ridding my mind of distress*" (2009: 146,147). It seems that part of the 'healing' was through writing her experiences where others could read them. In *Somewhere Towards the End*, she plunges very honestly into 'writing out' her thoughts on the losses and gains of growing old.

Both Joan Bakewell and Michele Hanson have regularly written in the *Guardian* about getting older. In a series of articles (later a book) that were "*a personal record of how I feel about being over seventy*", Joan Bakewell (2007: ix) produced reflective pieces on personal, social and political issues. She was particularly touched by the number of people who responded to the experiences and memories she shared. "*I am made thoughtful about what it is to be old by some of the letters I receive*", recognising the privileged life she lives, despite changes and losses: "*Recently a correspondent wrote about another kind of life than mine...*" (2007: 193). Her correspondents, too, wished to be heard.

In her column, Michele Hanson tells of being in her sixties where "*we're meant to be invisible and live in an empty nest with no one to look after. If only ... I wish I*

could stand and wonder. But ... I whizz about, keeping busy" (2009: 16). Her style is very different from Joan Bakewell's but is an equally personal account of getting older, along with what seems to be a need to let others know what it's like. She has a particular take on the joys of being post-menopausal:

And another fabulous bonus – one can be free, free, free of sex ... you don't need to pretend, because no one's interested (Hanson, 2009: 16).

Germaine Greer, in her fascinating study of women and the menopause, makes a similar point in somewhat different language:

If the sexuality of older women were allowed to define itself, it is possible that we would discover that older women are not overwhelmed with desire ... (1992: 7).

She points out that *"although the literature on menopause is vast, almost none of it has been written by women. Most of it has been written by men for the eyes of other men"* (Greer, 1992: 13). She was referring in the main to medical literature, and although some years have passed since she wrote this, the situation is only slowly beginning to improve. We need to be talking about our own experiences of getting older – and talking about them in places where they will be heard.

In her review of what she calls *"an emerging literature of the third age"*, Claire Armitstead describes a feminist analysis of how post-menopausal women are viewed: *"... the fear of menopause, and even some of its symptoms, are caused by a deep rooted misogyny which pervades western culture in general and the medical profession in particular"*. She writes of the need to address what she calls *"this sorry state of affairs"* as part of trying to understand why older women can experience themselves as invisible and unheard and points out that *"there is a direct link between invisibility and the poverty in which many old people find themselves, in a world geared to buying and selling"* (2009: 8).

When six women in their sixties calling themselves *The Hen Co-op* got together to write a book about their experiences, *Growing Old Disgracefully* (1993), it was because there seemed to be so little literature available about older women

actually written by older women. *“What was missing were the voices of women like ourselves”*. What they had to offer was:

... to speak in our own voices about our own experiences and maybe some of you would find us speaking to your experiences as well. We recognise our privileges as white middle-class women and do not presume that our circumstances are representative of all women ... (Hen Co-op, 1993: 8,9).

Writing over the past months with seven other older women, most of us at or towards the end of our paid working lives, has been a very powerful experience for us all. Exploring the issues around changing circumstances and perceptions, and writing about them very openly, has felt psychologically therapeutic for some, enlightening and enriching for others. We have all learned from it – and it seems we have all felt heard, by ourselves and by each other.

*It's like a magnet,
because when you start writing,
it magnetizes the world.*
(Cixous, 2004: 120)

Writing in visible language

*Language is how social organization and power
are defined and contested
and the place where our sense of self,
our subjectivity, is constructed.*

(Richardson, 1997: 89)

The language in which we write seems to me as important as what we're writing about. Writing is – or can be – a powerful and exciting way of exploring and communicating ideas. Julia Kristeva speaks of writing as the “*foundation for thought*” (Oliver, 2002: 11).

Laurel Richardson calls it “a way of ‘*knowing*’ – a method of discovery and analysis” (2000: 923). In a two-part lyrical paper on *Writing as inquiry*, she and Elizabeth St. Pierre offer a brief, contextual history of writing and language. St. Pierre talks about “*nomadic inquiry*” and poses the question: “*What else might writing do except mean?*” then quotes Deleuze and Guatarri: “*writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come*” (St. Pierre, 2005: 969).

I particularly enjoy Laurel Richardson’s fluent, informative and readable style of writing, with her insightful and challenging approach to the accepted mores of the academic world and emphasis on the importance of not boring your readers (1990, 1997, 2000, 2005). Much academic writing, however, appears to be in language accessible only to others in the same field. “*During my M.A.*” says Eric Mykhalovskiy, “*I was struck by the extent to which academics spoke only to themselves*” (1997: 235).

Wishing to communicate in ways that would be understandable to those not immersed in sociological texts (see ‘Research as adventure’ below) – and in particular to my co-researchers - I sent a letter to the group:

It's quite a while since I contacted all of you as a 'group', but I have another of my queries. It's about the language I use in writing this dissertation - which, by the way, I'm finally getting into.

As a bit of background (you can skip this bit if you want to go straight to the query at the end!) I've been feeling quite blocked about starting writing and had a very helpful tutorial with my supervisor last month, who did her usual wonderfully creative listening and suggesting. As a result I had one or two insights into / realisations about why and what I've been resisting.

To try and cut a long story a bit shorter - I've been telling myself I have to write 'chapters' (which is, of course, what people do for dissertations) whilst at the same time knowing I didn't want to do it that way. So I've now begun to write in what my supervisor calls my 'leaf gathering' mode - in other words, just writing down bits of stories, ideas, wonderings, theories etc. as they occur to me. I've already gathered quite a lot this way and am really enjoying doing it.

My other main resistance is to academic language, which I find often incomprehensible, excluding and difficult to read. My hope is to write this dissertation in what I'd term 'visible' language - and I want to state that I'm doing this deliberately - making it accessible and understandable to me (as well as anybody else who chooses to read it).

I'd really like to know what your take on this is - how do you feel about the language that I use in this writing about us, as visible women? Do you agree or disagree with me? Either way, I'd welcome your views, ideas, comments.

With thanks, as always

Christine

(email letter 22.03.09)

... as for me, not being an academic in any sense of the word, I don't have a clue about what academic language is! So, I say write so that I can understand what you're writing! I'm really interested in reading what you make out of my episodic letters and those of the others, but if I can't figure out what it means, I'll be really disappointed. Do what you feel works, what your heart says is "real" and go with it girl!

(Sara, 23.03.09)

I'm sure you know that I would really welcome it if you were to write in accessible non-academic language! That's probably because it's exactly the approach I would use. I don't think I could write 'academically' and when I worked very briefly as a local government policy analyst I could never write in the kind of report-writing style they wanted. I often feel that writing is like playing music - you write to the rhythms you feel yourself going along with ... I'd also like to see this published - I think my publisher - Routledge - could well be interested and I'd be happy for you to mention my name.

(Alison, 23.03.09)

Glad you have found a way to start your dissertation - must have been a very daunting task. I'm really happy for you to use whatever language you feel works but I think using 'visible' language will emphasise what you are writing about.

(Pat, 23.03.09)

Oh I completely tried to avoid academic language in my thesis, which might come back to bite me. I used footnotes to tie ideas to others which seemed to work pretty well. I completely vote for accessible, straight forward, clear, and world changing language! (Cindy, 23.03.09)

Thanks for your message and query. I really think this is a brilliant idea - it's about time academia got off it's pedestal in relation to the tight 'boundaries' that are supposed to indicate this is heady stuff! Imagine being able to read academic stuff in understandable visible language - it sounds too wonderful. Go for it gal, you've always gone for doing things differently, and you do it WELL. I love it. (Jane, 25.03.09)

You must use any language you feel appropriate as this is your work. In my opinion and as the work is about visibility, a real and accessible, visible language is very appropriate. Also, because I'm dying to read the said work I'd like to understand it. (Lynn, 13.04.09)

I don't know if I will ever be able to just let words and thoughts flow anymore without censure but I did want to say to you that 'your writing' in place of 'dissertation' captures the essence - you only ever do your writing, without self conscious adornments or jargonese, and I so look forward to reading the final version. (Marie, 15.04.09)

I was warmed by their feisty responses and moved (as always) by how much they have engaged with this 'visibility' issue at so many levels. As I said to them:

It's been very good for my writing heart to have such a resounding YES to what I plan to do ... I feel very supported in my writing by all this affirmation of my determination to do it My Way - and excited by the way in which you all seem eager to read whatever comes out at the end of it. Quite a challenge!

My continuing thanks to you all,

Christine

(excerpt from email 16.04.09)

The first task for contemporary feminist narratologists is to expose both the workings of the master script in women's narratives and women's subversions of it so that we can better learn how nonunitary subjectivity can be represented.

(Bloom, 1998: 66)

Writing into the gaps

*I do not want to see what is shown.
I want to see what is secret.
What is hidden among the visible.*
(Cixous, 2005: 184)

When thoroughly bogged down in writing my MSc thesis (Bell, 1995), searching for the language to convey the excitement I felt about my inquiry into change and right brain, creative thinking, I stumbled across the philosophical writings of two men, one from the 1930s (Lev Vygotsky) and the other the 1960s (Michael Polanyi). Despite my prejudices about male theoreticians – and the fact that the language and ideas can seem out-dated and difficult to read - I found their work around how we think and then tell our thoughts interesting and relevant.

Vygotsky wrote about 'inner speech' and how difficult it can be to turn thoughts and ideas into communicable language: *"inner speech is ... a dynamic, shifting, unstable thing, fluttering between word and thought"* (1986: 249). He seemed to be describing my struggles with processing what I wanted to say.

I took heart from Michael Polanyi: *"I shall reconsider human knowledge by starting from the fact that we can know more than we can tell"* (1967: 4), feeling eligible to join what he calls *"a society of explorers"* (1967: 83). I don't know what my reaction would have been if I had encountered him in the 1960s. As a young woman then, I was running away as fast as possible from the kind of philosophical and moral thinking I grew up with, and not at all sure what I was running towards. *"The anticipation of discovery, like discovery itself, may turn out to be a delusion"* (1967: 25).

Launching myself into this doctoral journey, browsing the literal and virtual libraries now available - with much help and guidance along the way - I have excitedly devoured the writings of some of the current giants of philosophical thinking (see 'Research as adventure' below) and felt encouraged in my attempts to tell stories rather than make statements about what I am experiencing and learning. It has,

much of the time, felt like writing into an unknown space – not at all sure what, if anything, I am discovering that may be of interest to others.

In a seminar at Bristol University in 2008, Jean Clandinin talked about the book she jointly edited on *Narrative Inquiry* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and of beginning to think about knowledge differently. Learning how to tell the stories of what we know in a different way – of “*embodied rhythmical knowledge alongside ‘known’ knowledge*” - and the importance of wondering about what happens in the spaces in between, “*the borderlines and cracks between stories*”, Jean Clandinin wondered what all this might mean to us as researchers. She ended by telling us about “*trying on the hat of being post-structuralist*” and “*maybe deciding to take it off*” – and of her reluctance to “*nail down*” any theoretical position, preferring to put something together “*just for now*” (Clandinin, 2008: verbatim notes).

Through my reading, listening, learning and writing around these borderline spaces, I have begun to get a real sense of the massive undertaking by those feminist and poststructuralist thinkers and writers who have led the way in subverting the ‘master narrative’; allowing for gaps and for not knowing, searching for another language to tell the stories.

*Stories long to be used rather than analysed,
to be told and retold
rather than theorised and settled.*
(Bochner, 1997: 431).

On not doing research

You don't need to know everything.

*There is no everything. The stories
themselves make the meaning.*

(Winterson, 2004: 134)

Research as adventure

*This nomadic writing journey ...
has been both gruelling and exhilarating ...
This story has no beginning and no end ...
(St. Pierre, 2000: 276)*

'Research' can be a problematic as well as a useful word, from my perspective. I feel the need to put at least mental inverted commas around it, in order to disentangle my current understanding from the old science-based approaches that I grew up with and rejected. These seemed to involve a mysterious process carried out by experts who knew (but didn't necessarily tell what they knew or how they knew it) with subjects who were studied and questioned in various ways (but were not allowed or encouraged to study or ask questions back).

Being on this voyage of discovery has included reading a large number of academic texts which were new to me, containing exciting and sometimes quite revolutionary ideas about changing the ways in which reflective thinking and reflexive research is carried forward. Whilst I have often struggled to understand the terminology and language used - which can seem exclusive and impenetrable for those not part of the scholastic world (see 'Writing in visible language' above) - it is not, of course, a bad thing as a student to have to work hard to understand something.

In exploring the idea of "*getting lost as a methodology*", Patti Lather (2007: 3) seems to be inviting us to enjoy feeling dislocated and unsure of ourselves, in order to "*produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently*" (13).

In a certain way, there is perhaps no voyage worthy of the name except one that takes place there where, in all senses of the word, one loses oneself, one runs such a risk, without even taking or assuming this risk: not even of losing oneself but of getting lost.

(Derrida, in Lather, 2007: 11)

The philosopher Julia Kristeva was born (the same year as me) in Bulgaria, leaving to study in Paris in her early 20s. Becoming part of an extraordinarily dynamic circle of intellectuals in the 1960s - including Derrida, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Barthes - *"in an extremely male-dominated environment"* (Moi, 1986: 3), she *"helped to formulate a type of post-structuralism"*, explaining that:

... mere structure was not sufficient to understand the world of meaning in literature and other human behaviours. Two more elements were necessary. history and the speaking subject (Kristeva, in McAfee, 2004: 7).

These are, of course, two essential elements of my inquiry into this phenomenon of the perceived visibility/invisibility of older women – the story of what has gone before, both personal and in the outer world, and the actual voices of us, the women.

Julia Kristeva talks of the way language changes when it is spoken by what she calls the *"living, breathing, speaking being"* (Kristeva, in McAfee, 2004: 6). I can sense the excitement generated by her innovative and exploratory thinking in her massive doctoral thesis in 1974, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, where she suggested that it is possible to transform the structure of literary representation:

...a revolution in poetic language is analogous to a political revolution (Kristeva, in Oliver, 2002: 24).

In an interview in 2007, her work was described as *"a theory of language that foregrounded the disruptive elements – the playful, lyrical, rhythmic, emotional aspects (the 'semiotic') – which are always, she believes, in dialogue with the rational business of denoting meaning (the 'symbolic')"* (Miller, 2007: 11).

In her work on feminist methodology and narrative interpretation, Leslie Bloom engages with *"theories of the speaking subject whose individuality and self-awareness or subjectivity is multiple, conflicted, complex, fragmented, and in constant flux"*. These theories, she says, are slowly displacing *"the master narratives of unified individuality"* (1998: 2); in other words, we're all a lot more complicated than some early sociological/anthropological researchers would have us believe.

Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon play around with alternative approaches to social science in their innovative, multi-authored book on doing collective biography (described as a *“post-structuralist writing practice”* (2006: 172):

By taking oneself and one’s own ongoing experiences as the data ... the gap between memories and the interpretive analytic work of research is closed (2006: 3).

In what they call *“a conversation about the struggles of collaborative writing”* (Davies & Gannon, 2006: 114) the two editors pay lengthy tribute to Hélène Cixous, who uses intricate and evocative poetic language to develop her own ideas and to tell of her struggles with writing about what happens within as well as outside herself (see ‘The Wilful Extremist’ below):

When I feel that I’m totally defeated by the task, by something which is too big for me ... noting it is as if I were at least drawing the line where I have been checkmated - there at least, and there, I can’t go further. And usually it helps me take a rest, and start again (Cixous, 2004: 121).

Although Hélène Cixous is sometimes grouped together with other female original thinkers and writers in France of her generation, I agree with Mireille Calle-Gruber:

I am surprised that people generally name Cixous – Irigaray – Kristeva together, amalgamating works between which I see mostly differences. Particularly: literary difference. Irigaray and Kristeva are theoreticians, they do not produce writer’s work (Calle-Gruber, in Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997: 7).

While there is nothing the matter with theoreticians, the talk that makes my heart and brain sing (see Bird, 2004) is that which tells the stories of *how* people hold their knowledge.

In the quote at the start of this section, Elizabeth St. Pierre sums up her experience of interviewing a group of older, white southern women in the rural American community where she grew up. She was surprised to find herself still attached to the place itself, after 20 years away, and tells how her work moved from being a study of ‘others’ to an exploration of how women’s lives (including her own) and sense of themselves are shaped – especially as they get older - by *“the limits and possibilities”* of what’s available to them. She learned to stay with and enjoy the

“nomadic journey” to “places I have been unable to imagine” (2000: 258) rather than expecting/hoping to reach conclusions.

The study was started because, as she too grew older, she had become curious about what these women *“who taught me how to be a woman ... have done and continue to do every day that makes them who they are ...*

My research is not motivated by the desire to produce knowledge for knowledge’s sake. I urgently need to hear what these women tell me about thinking and doing; in fact, during our interviews two years ago, I often sat on the edge of my chair waiting for their responses to my questions” (St. Pierre, 2000: 259).

I like this urgency of needing to hear responses, which became so much part of my own experience as I wrote letters to my seven ‘visible women’ and waited (sometimes impatiently) for replies. Keeping the very many different strands of correspondence on the go over a period of a year and more was demanding, exciting and totally fascinating. As I told my supervisor, *“I’m in love with my research”*. So much so that I needed to come off the edge of my chair and bring the letter-writing part of the adventure to an end, if I was ever going to write this dissertation.

*I don’t plan ever. The only thing I plan
is not planning, but I don’t even plan that.*
(Cixous, 2004: 122).

*I'm gathering far more than
I ever thought – though maybe not
more than I hoped ...*

*I think I could go on 'gathering' for
the rest of my life.*

(Personal journal, 29 April 2008)

*Been well and truly stuck
since last writing here ...*

*I'm still gathering the stories and
LOVING doing it. I'm in love with my
research ...*

*that can't be underestimated
as a plus ... plus ... plus ...
of this task I've set myself ...*

*but – and it feels like a big BUT –
I haven't yet written
even a fragment
of a chapter ...*

(Personal journal – written just before a
supervision session: 10 February 2009)

The wilful extremist

*The person we have been is now an 'I was',
the character from our past.
She follows us, but at a distance.*
(Cixous, in Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997: 138)

According to the blurb on the back of Hélène Cixous's book *Stigmata* (2005), she was described by the London *Times* as a “wilful extremist”. Her work is apparently (and not surprisingly) often misunderstood; it is potentially difficult and I have heard it described as impenetrable. Unlike my (slightly resentful) struggles with some of the academic texts described earlier, however, I can feel myself opening up and responding to her words in an emotional and physical way.

From her preface to *Stigmata*:

The texts collected and stitched together sewn and re sewn in this volume share the trace of a wound. They were caused by a blow, they are the transfiguration of a spilling of blood, be it real or translated into a haemorrhage of the soul (Cixous, 2005: xi).

I experience her shaping language in the way that Louise Bourgeois creates her art (see ‘My story – part four’ below), with metaphor and symbol to tell and re-tell her memories, to explore past wounds and present thoughts and feelings. Her words are like exotic antenna, ‘feeling’ her way into whatever she is exploring, circling around it, sometimes probing deeply, sometimes gently brushing across the surface and withdrawing to see what might happen.

A kind of work takes place in this space that we do not know, that precedes writing, and that must be a sort of enormous region or territory where a memory has been collected, a memory composed of all sorts of signifying elements that have been kept or noted – or of events that time has transformed into signifiers, pearls and corals of the ‘language’ of the soul ...
(Cixous, in Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997: 29).

The work of Hélène Cixous has been one of my inspirations during this process of inquiry, entering into the depths and complexity of her ideas and stories around the self and the other, literary theory, philosophy, post-colonialism, her personal history, relationships, politics, power, feminism, family, place – and the pain and pleasure of writing - weaving poetic narratives as she goes.

*When I begin to write,
it always starts from something unexplained,
mysterious and concrete ...
It begins to search in me.
And this question should be philosophical;
but for me, right away it takes the poetic path.
That is to say
that it goes through scenes, moments, illustrations
lived by myself or by others,
and like all that belongs to the current of life,
it crosses very many zones of our histories.
I seize these moments still trembling,
moist, creased, disfigured, stammering.*

(Cixous, in Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997: 43)

*I have often declared my admiration for Hélène Cixous,
for the person and for the work:
immense, powerful, so multiple but unique
I have even written ...
that Hélène Cixous is in my eyes, today,
the greatest writer in the French language.*

(Derrida, in Cixous, 2005: ix)

My story – part three: adventure as research

*I have seen the Bird of Paradise,
she has spread herself before me,
and I shall never be the same again.*
(Laing, 1967: 156)

According to my father's plans, I should have been immersed in preparation for bettering the world in some way, preferably academically and at Oxford, his old 'alma mater'. It was for this, he told me, that he had insisted I stick with Latin at school. Instead, in November 1961, a couple of months past my twentieth birthday, I was a degree-less 'ten pound pom' on an ancient and overcrowded P&O liner slowly steaming towards Australia. Reasons for going included:

I'll be half a world away from most of my family and their expectations

I can get that far away for £10!

I want to do something different – all on my own

Being born in China of missionary parents, I had done a lot of long-distance sea travel between continents without having any say in where or why. This time it was my choice and, the more the 'grown ups' suggested it wasn't a good idea, the more determined I was to go. It was only as the boat began its stately turn away from Tilbury docks that my determination began to wobble slightly, as I stood amongst the crowd at the rails and wept, waving to my two much-loved older brothers on the quay.

Going to the other side of the world then was still a real adventure. It took five weeks or more to get to the west coast of Australia by sea and the £10 deal (more than I earned in a week) committed immigrants to spending at least two years in that country. Telephone contact was expensive, had to be booked in advanced and was often virtually inaudible. Air travel was out of the reach of most people and

many emigrating from Europe went not knowing if they would see their home country again. I was aware of all this – it was one of the reasons for going as far away as possible; what I didn't know, of course, was how it would actually feel.

Once the weeping stopped – somewhere around the time we were steaming out of the Thames Estuary into the English Channel – I began to look around and feel surprisingly all right. There were a lot of young people about, most of them apparently on their own, too, looking very lost and quite a few also very seasick. At least I'd experienced this sort of 'leaving' before, many times – and had never been seasick.

The tiny, airless, below-the-waterline cabin, with three bunk beds, six drawers and six clothes-hooks on the walls for its six inhabitants, was a bit of a shock; previous sea voyages had never been luxurious but this was definitely 'steerage'. It was rowdy, cramped and increasingly hot below decks and there were occasional flare-ups and fights amongst the male emigrants (mostly white) and some of the lower rank crew (mostly non-white).

The other five young women in the cabin were all away from home for the first time and both sea and homesick. They were all office workers, like me, but had all still been living with their parents - whereas since leaving school at 18 I had been in a shared flat in London. Though still very shy and lacking in confidence, I felt suddenly quite knowledgeable and experienced, having spent much of my life moving around between different households, places and countries.

For the first day or so the six of us stuck together, not knowing anybody else. Gradually the enforced closeness of the cabin produced disputes rather than friendships - squabbles over someone using more than one clothes-hook or making a lot of noise at night, somebody being seasick and regularly not making it to the communal washrooms. I discovered how much my familiarity with shipboard routines worked in my favour, as I found other, quieter places to sleep - in the lounges, on the floor of the library, even in the dining room, as long as you were up and away before the cleaning staff came round. I knew in advance about the

boredom and the claustrophobic atmosphere, the importance of having time to myself and of getting some exercise, even if it was only walking round and round the decks.

Life on a long-distance liner happened within an enclosed, isolated environment, with very little to do for weeks on end except wait for the next port of call. There were well over 1,000 passengers and, as we bucketed our way through the Bay of Biscay and into the relative calm of the Mediterranean, the particular hierarchies of relationships and groupings that happen on board ship began to emerge and develop.

What really surprises me now, recalling and reliving the story of that voyage, is how well I seemed to have managed to maintain my (often shaky) inner equilibrium during this literal and metaphorical transition from one side of the world to the other. Without knowing it then, I recognised enough about the various clusters forming and re-forming (amoeba-like) around different leaders – ‘enough’ at least to know that I didn’t want to become part of any of them ...

GOOD LOOKING AND POPULAR

Clever and arrogant

Intellectual and distant

None of these and don’t care

Desperate to be allowed to join

Fuck off - I wanna be alone

Having learned as a child to keep quiet and be watchful when not sure, I joined in without joining and retreated as things got drunken and edgy ... and noticed a few others doing something similar. About a week into the voyage, as the boat neared the Suez Canal, we ‘others’ had become a sort of non-group, walking or swimming together in twos and threes during the long, boring days, spaced around the public

areas reading on our own, meeting after dinner and drifting out on deck to talk or look at the moon when most people were rowdily in the bar.

I thought being part of this non-group was wonderful, like being in a novel. Our ages ranged from me (20) to Joyce, probably in her late thirties and a refugee from first class; she seemed impossibly sophisticated, yet decided to mother me, letting me use her first class cabin during the day to catch up on sleep and have a shower in peace. As I recall them all and look at our group photos, their names come back to me like a cast list:

Joyce: rich, charming, clever and often drunk, on a recuperative 'holiday' after the death of her husband and her brother in a car accident.

Peter: hunky, handsome, blonde, Australian outback ranch-worker and writer, just had his first novel published and returning home after 'doing' Europe.

Hiram: (originally John), thin, darkly funny and intense, Jewish-American just out of Harvard and going to an academic post in Sydney.

Muriel: strikingly pretty, with an Indian mother, very articulate and lively, a teacher emigrating for more money and better weather.

Liz: swimming champion, muscly, sporty and fun, who had spent her childhood in Western Australia and was returning to teach P.E. in a country town.

Jim: good-looking, gentle and quiet, a sort of low-key English playboy without any money, on board because he couldn't quite decide what to do with himself.



I was astonished to have been noticed at all, let alone have my opinions solicited and listened to by these clever and interesting people. I felt terribly grown-up and almost relevant. It all happened more than 45 years ago, yet my memories of that voyage still seem very clear – whether they are ‘true’ or not. This is perhaps to do with it being the first time that I had really felt separate enough as a person in my own right, together with having that recognised and acknowledged by people I liked and felt comfortable with.

I spent hours talking with kind, handsome Peter – who I strangely didn’t fancy at all; he was engaged to somebody ‘back home’ he wasn’t sure he loved any more, while all he really wanted was to write another book. We talked about writing, which I had allowed to become unimportant to me as I battled to do things my way, leave school and become independent – I had even stopped keeping a journal. Our conversations – and his interest - helped me remember how much writing meant to me still.

Climbing aboard another boat back to England from Sydney two years later, I was more obviously visible and assertive. With my first proper love affair and an assortment of low-key drugs under my belt (as it were), along with a formidable Australian accent and vocabulary of swear words, I’d learned a different way of

being in the world; or could at least fool people I had. For the previous year I'd also been earning money writing and researching, working for an educational publishing company and spending blissful hours in libraries with access to restricted archive documents.

When thinking about this 'leaf' of my story, memories around my time in Australia emerged and jostled for attention. As I started to write, the journey and 'the group' became the focus, with the recognition of how it helped my entry into a new life; the transition was, in itself, transformational. I had known many short-term friendships, due to constantly moving, but for those few weeks I had been part of a group which was different from previous, girlhood relationships. It was certainly more challenging and demanding intellectually, yet, in my idealised memory, also more supportive in the spaces that were allowed – not to join in sometimes, to be alone, to disagree, to be listened to as well as listen, to spend time with one person without offending another.

The journey for me ended, symbolically, on New Year's Day 1962 and I disembarked in Fremantle excitedly, if a little sadly. I would miss 'the group' (and we never met again) but the next bit of the adventure had arrived and I was more or less ready for it.

*People are called to their wilderness
in order to alter themselves
and miscall it 'finding themselves'.*

(Stronach, 2002: 294)

Stories as witness

*One of the most persistent but elusive ways
that people make sense of themselves
is to show themselves to themselves
through multiple forms.*

(Myerhoff, 1986: 261)

"I am studying my own kind", says Barbara Myerhoff in the touching documentary film ('Number Our Days', 1977) about her research with a group of marginalised, elderly immigrant Jews living in poverty in Venice, California. It is an affecting film, made even more so by her expectation of becoming *"a little old Jewish lady"*; but we know that she died (aged nearly 50) of breast cancer a few years after completing the study.

She was interested in – and shocked by - these people's *"severe invisibility and the consequent disturbing psychological and social consequences of being unnoticed"* and describes the ways in which they *"made themselves be seen"* through what she calls *"a definitional ceremony"* (Myerhoff, 1986: 262, 263):

Definitional ceremonies deal with the problems of invisibility and marginality; they are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen in one's own terms, garnering witness to one's worth, vitality and being (1986: 267).

The problem of invisibility seems to arise for any of us when we experience ourselves, our lives and stories not being acknowledged and 'witnessed' in some way. Whilst I am not in any way equating my work with Barbara Myerhoff's, she has fascinating things to say which seem relevant for this exploration, about how perceived invisibility is *"not irreversible"* if we have enough *"ingenuity, imagination and boldness ... flying in the face of external reality"* (1986: 263) to gather witnesses to our stories and existence.

*By denying their invisibility, isolation, and impotence,
they made themselves be seen, and in being seen
they came into being in their own terms, as authors of themselves.*
(Myerhoff, 1986: 263)

A narrative conversation

Interviewing ... is essentially a conversation ...
(Oakley, 1981: 32)

My intention, as I firmly told my seven women correspondents at the start, was *not* to interview them, but to have what I called “a sort of ongoing email conversation” where I would ask occasional questions and hope to initiate an ongoing, two-way narrative dialogue with each of them – and possibly have a bit of group chat as well. I would be using my own experience and story as well as theirs in this exploration, and very specifically invited questions and comments back from them on any aspect of our dialogue.

Bearing in mind Ann Oakley’s wonderfully scathing feminist text on the absurdity of the “*correct interviewing behaviour*” of not allowing “*properly socialised respondents*” to engage in “*asking questions back*” (1981: 35), I must have chosen my co-researchers well, as they have all done what they felt like doing, including not always answering my questions, often resolutely *not* asking questions back or making comments.

The interview has become a means of contemporary storytelling ...
(Fontana & Frey, 2005: 699)

Their approaches were all different, but as a generalisation, while most of the ‘visible women’ seemed interested in taking the opportunity to do some personal reflection on and general storytelling about their lives, two of them chose to write about themselves more objectively, within a clear political and social framework. From my perspective – and they have all told me they share this view – we have been having via email something that has resembled a genuine dialogue, rather than the sort of ‘pseudo-conversation’ that continues to maintain the old power imbalances between interviewer and interviewee (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Kvale, 1996 ... and others)

... any researcher with a strong commitment to conversations as collaborative research endeavours can fairly swiftly learn how to position themselves alongside people as de-centred and influential co-researchers (Speedy, 2007: 132).

Whilst believing that our correspondence does not bear much resemblance to old patterns of sociological interviewing, I am aware that there are, of course, power imbalances implicit in the fact that the 'conversations' were initiated by me and the focus is ultimately the work for this dissertation, written and/or put together by me. Leslie Bloom has some interesting things to say about both 'interviews' and 'conversations' being what she calls "*natural speech events*" (1998: 40) and disagrees with Ann Oakley's (1981) premise that interviewing women is a contradiction in terms. She believes that "*if the goal ... is to collect narratives, then ... [it] is an interview*" (1998: 41).

One of my initial goals was certainly to elicit stories, in order to construct the narratives; but I think what we have been doing amongst and between ourselves has taken us beyond 'collecting' to something more like collaborative writing (Davies & Gannon, 2006) and the "*interpretive community*" which Jerome Bruner says can emerge in time from "*the sharing of common stories*" (2002: 25).

The initial agreement by my co-researchers was based on an informal email, telephone or face-to-face invitation from me, when I laid out of my wares in a sort of 'car boot sale' style. It was very much open to individual interpretation of what they would or would not want to be doing, how this would be happening and for how long; most were happy for the process be open-ended, whilst one wanted to be able to set a time limit.

I followed this up with some slightly more formal scene-setting and practical information, such as my working title and some explanation of what I hoped to be doing and what was being asked of them. It was also agreed between us that the research 'conversation' would be by letter (preferably email) and not face-to-face. Two of the women live in the USA and although I have, in fact, met up with all

seven over the period of our working together, these meetings have been social and not recorded as part of the research.

None of the other women knew each other and, with everybody's agreement - after over a year of my corresponding with them individually - there was a brief period of email exchanges between all the women in the 'group'. These were mostly responses to ideas or questions put out by me, but there were occasional other individual initiatives or pieces of shared news which provoked replies. Whilst I and some others very much enjoyed this part of the collective experience, three of the women made it clear that they wanted this group contact to be limited – because of time, emotional energy and other commitments.

Telling others about oneself is ... no simple matter. It depends on what we think they think we ought to be like ... (Bruner, 2002: 66).

Being *"in love with my research"* (see 'Research as adventure' above) made it very difficult to bring the conversation to a close with the six who had not already chosen to do so. I was still fascinated by the story gathering, the unasked and unanswered questions, the things I might now never know about these women who had told me so much about themselves. It made clear again, of course, that this wasn't just an ordinary 'conversation' and that my needs came first, however careful I might be about respecting theirs.

So I wrote to them all, with thanks and appreciation for what they had given me – and we said a sort of goodbye, even though our contact has actually continued. Each of them said, in their different ways, that our narrative conversations have deepened and enriched the relationship we already had, so that we 'know' each other (and ourselves) differently.

Writing stories and personal narratives have increasingly become the structures through which I make sense of my world.

(Richardson, 2005: 966)

Women on a journey

From Penelope to the present,

women have waited ...

If we grow weary of waiting,

we can go on a journey.

(Morris, 1996: xxii)

My story – part four: doing, undoing and redoing

*I have been to hell and back.
And let me tell you, it was wonderful.*

(Bourgeois, 2007)

This brief 'postcard from the edge', telling of a gruelling yet wonderful inner metaphorical journey, is beautifully – incongruously? - embroidered in blue silk on a small white handkerchief by a remarkable woman. Louise Bourgeois travelled from Paris to New York in her twenties and has lived and worked there ever since. Now in her late nineties, she continues to create her extraordinary and disturbing works of art, with an immense collection of drawings, paintings, texts on paper and fabric, sculptures in various materials (hard and soft), installations and rooms or 'cells' – some of it never seen publicly. For many years she worked in relative obscurity, neither seeking fame nor attracting much attention – which gave her freedom to develop as she chose, without reference to artistic fashion or market trends (see Bernadac, 1996; Ekman, 1994).

Recognition of Louise Bourgeois's work could only come with the emergence of a new sensibility typical of the 'post-modern generation' that advocated a return to subjectivity, to a form of expressionism, to an eclecticism perceived as liberating in the face of strict formalist norms ... Bourgeois's special status also stems from her feminist stance ...
(Bernadac, 1996: 7).

Much of her work is based on an obsessive exploration of her memories, dreams, fears and anxieties. She tells us: *"I am a prisoner of my memories and my aim is to get rid of them"*, and at the same time: *"I need my memories – they are my documents"* (Bourgeois Retrospective, 2007). She seems to have been on a continuous journey of exploration of her past, much of it driven by an intense, passionate anger. Her early story – constantly retold through her work over the past 70 years - is of family traumas and loss within the parent-child relationship; memories, dreams and fantasies are made visible, given meaning and shape (see Bernadac, 1996; Morris, 2000, 2007). A painted text that refers to her vivid, red 'Insomnia Drawings' (Retrospective, 2007) says starkly:

The landscapes of the night have invaded the day.

Louise Bourgeois has written diaries and expansive notes for years, using language in as intense and passionate a way as she produces her other art, and I find it difficult to believe her when she says: *"I am suspicious of words. They do not interest me, they do not satisfy me"* (Morris, 2007: 294). She often uses words and produces other works which evoke space and territory, invite journeys from one place to another.

"Art is notoriously hard to talk about", says Clifford Geertz, so we tend to respond to it by trying to *"describe, analyze, compare, judge, classify"* (1983: 94, 95). I hope to stay away from doing any of those things, except, perhaps, for some subjective description of a personal journey through, on and around a monumental artwork.

In an interview Louise Bourgeois said: *"Art is the experiencing – or rather the re-experiencing – of a trauma"* (Bernadac, 1996: 8). I have become fascinated by both the woman and her work since my unnerving encounter with her installation of three huge, steel 'mother' towers – I Do, I Undo, I Redo - at the opening of Tate Modern (Bourgeois, 2000). Six years later I produced a 'life story' piece about it (Bell, 2006), the writing of which was in some ways as troubling as my original experience.

My tale of being alone in the huge turbine hall early one morning - exploring the towers, with their disturbing hidden objects and distorting mirrors, vertiginous open spiral staircases and claustrophobic enclosed spaces - was told from the three coincident perspectives of Parent, Adult and Child (Berne, 1968; Steiner, 1990). It was an extraordinarily powerful internal and external journey. When presented as a paper at a couple of conferences, it evoked strong reactions in those present and I am intrigued by the impact of art such as this, and the 'liminal spaces' (Turner, 1982) it offers towards experiencing and exploring emotions.

There is something peculiarly and essentially female as well as feminist about Louise Bourgeois's work. She uses strong visual images of needles and spiders –

benign and reminiscent of her patient mother sewing and restoring tapestries – to spin and weave stories into what she does, with words and shapes and spaces. She has been an important reference point in my own emotional and writing journey over the past few years and seems to embody the “*memory that underlies narrative*” (Kristeva, 2001: 17). She is a wonderfully difficult, strong, angry old woman who finally became publicly visible and told her story in her seventies and has refused to disappear ever since.

*Art is a way of recognizing oneself,
which is why it will always be modern.*

(Louise Bourgeois in Morris, 2007: 246)

Choosing my travelling companions

Women, I have come to feel, move through the world differently from men ... for many women, the inner landscape is as important as the outer, the beholder as significant as the beheld. The landscape is shaped by the consciousness of the person who crosses it. There is a dialogue between what is happening within and without.

(Morris, 1996: xviii)

Looking back over the landscape we have been crossing together, I remember the deliciously slow and 'self-indulgent' process of choosing the women who became my travelling companions. Bearing in mind Arthur Bochner's thoughts on criteria being "*ultimately and inextricably tied to our values and our subjectivities*" (2000: 266), I wrote myself some helpful hints which – interestingly – I cannot find anywhere among my heaps of notes and journalings. It went something like this:

- over 50 (at least)
- range of experiences and preferably backgrounds
- have known and lived through 'difficulties'
- an ability to reflect on and write about these things
- different enough from me, in how they think and tell
(to make it interesting and challenging for us)

and I remember it seemed important to choose women who I knew well enough to be sure they would be 'good respondents'. Leslie Bloom, in her section on 'feminist methodology', has some ideas on this:

Being a 'good respondent' is as problematic a role as being a 'good listener'. To be a good respondent, it is necessary to be able to talk, to narrate experiences and feelings, and to reflect on these (1998: 21).

I also wanted to be one of my own respondents, to actively take part in this journey and find travelling companions who would be happy to experiment with collaborative research (Davies & Gannon, 2006), where I was using and sharing my own experience alongside theirs.

I talked or emailed with around a dozen women who fitted my personal criteria and (I hoped) might be interested in exploring ideas around visibility/invisibility – women known over the years through work, educational programmes, campaigning activities and other contacts. They were all, without exception, fascinated by the idea, though (unfortunately from my point of view) the three non-white women approached decided early on that a long-term correspondence would be too big a commitment.

Eventually, after a productive time with large sheets of paper and different coloured pens in my hut up the garden, I came up with a 'long list' of eight who were interested and seemed to have the time. I contacted them all, setting out my ideas more fully and asking if they could commit to an open-ended, ongoing email correspondence on their experiences of being 'older women' (whatever that might mean to them).

I had expected at least some of them to say No. They all said Yes – though one had to withdraw early on, because of a series of life events which became too immediately demanding. So there I was in the autumn of 2007, with seven women ready to go ... ALISON, CINDY, JANE, LYNN, MARIE, PAT AND SARA.

*... starting from the lives of women is critical
because it allows women to define themselves ...
and validate their own experiences.*

(Bloom, 1998: 145)

Sisters in poetry

*How you talked! And how I listened,
spellbound, humbled, daughterly,
to your tall tales, your wise words ...*

(from *Premonitions*, Carol Ann Duffy, 2009*)

At last! After more than 300 years of men ...
on the 1st May 2009 we finally have a woman poet laureate.

She feels like one of us.

She's a woman after all our hearts.

She's fifty-three and openly gay.

She's wonderfully visible and has a sense of humour.

She's donating her laureate's annual stipend to the Poetry Society
but she wants the 'butt of sack' that goes with the post up front
– and she wants her 600 bottles of sherry dry.

At her 'anointment' Carol Ann Duffy said (among many other things):

*"It is a great day for women writers ...
It highlights the way that women writers
have changed the landscape of literature in this country."
(Higgins, 2009: 3)*

*Extract from *Premonitions* by Carol Ann Duffy (dedicated to the memory of UA Fanthorpe)
in *Guardian Review*, 2 May 2009: 2

Visible lives

When I was a child ...
no one supposed
that women over 50
were invisible.
On the contrary,
they blacked out the sky.

(Mantel, 2009b: 9)

First Fig

My candle burns at both ends;

It will not last the night;

But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends –

It gives a lovely light!

(Edna St. Vincent Millay, 1922)

Poetry and letters

*... poetic representation reveals
the process of self-construction,
the reflexive basis of self-knowledge,
the inconsistencies and contradictions
of a life spoken of as a meaningful whole ...*
(Richardson, 1997: 143)

Poetic inquiry is ...

Monica Prendergast (2009) has produced a list ... *29 Ways of Looking at Poetry as Qualitative Research*, looking rather like a narrative poem. My favourite is:

XIX

*Poetic inquiry is a way of knowing through poetic language and devices;
metaphor, lyric, rhythm, imagery, emotion, attention, wide-awakeness,
opening to the world, self-revelation.*

No. XV says it is “*most commonly seen as poetic transcription and representation of participant data*”. Which is what it seems I have been doing in the stories that follow.

Laurel Richardson writes (above) about what she calls “*the poetic representation of lives*” where, after recording a long interview with a woman called Louisa May, she produced “*a poem masquerading as a transcript and a transcript masquerading as a poem*” (1997: 139) .

What I hope to do is to follow in her footsteps, whilst conveying the sense of space and pleasure involved (for all the ‘visible women’) in the telling of stories through the ‘conversation’ of our evolving, lengthy correspondence. There is something special, I believe, about writing and receiving personal letters, in whatever form they are written. There is the anticipation and expectation of a response, as in other ways of communicating, yet the time dimension is somehow on a different level. We can wait ... reflect ... perhaps feel some ‘ought to’ pressure to reply ... or not think about responding at all until we choose to.

My invitation in these conversations has been to specifically focus on ourselves and find our own way to tell the stories. It has been interesting to look at websites and articles exploring the ideas of *epistolary research* as a way of ‘representing lives’ (for example Jolly & Stanley, 2005; Stanley, 2009).

More enjoyable has been reading collections of letters between people, whether real or fictional, where I get a sense of developing and changing relationships as the conversational exchanges and stories grow ... many examples, but two very different ones are Carrie Fisher’s *Postcards from the Edge* (1987); and Michael Steinman’s *The Element of Lavishness: the letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell 1938-1978* (2001).

*Never mislay a pleasure. I might die in the night,
so I will write to William now.*

(Warner to Maxwell, in Steinman, 2001: preface)

XXI

*Poetic inquiry is called by a multiplicity of names in social science
but is always interested in expressing human experience,
whether that of Self or Other or both.*

(Prendergast, 2009)

In the endless babble of narrative,

in spite of the daily noise,

the story waits to be heard.

(Jeanette Winterson, 2004: 135)

The Russian Doll Theory of Visibility ... and other stories

My Russian Doll theory grew from journal musings, as the correspondence with individual women developed and I began having more intense internal conversations with myself as well as external discussions with others about the nature of visibility and invisibility, and what it seems to mean for each of us.

Reading Hilary Mantel's piece in the Guardian Review last Saturday about failing to notice that women hold up half the sky when she was writing her first version of her novel about the French Revolution. About her realisation that she needed to put the women in there – make them visible – even though her research hadn't shown anything about the women – she learned to invent – because of the lack of written information ... "or rather, it was there, but we weren't seeing it."

As I write more letters to my visible women – both in response to them and also about myself – I can almost feel the whole idea expanding – tentacles exploring – what I meant, or thought I meant, when I started and what it's now turning into. So the meanings of 'visible' and 'invisible' keep changing, almost morphing into each other in an unexpected opening up of the potential sense of freedom in being able to be visible to oneself through becoming (sometimes) invisible to others.

*The potential power of allowing oneself
not to have to be 'out there' / seen –
unless choosing to be*

I'm also very aware of the choices I'm making in what to respond to in other women's letters – and what to say about my response / why I've responded – and then what to reveal/tell about myself. I really

want to put myself in there, alongside the others – even when not invited. Yet also know that I can't tell every story I might want to tell for reasons of space, appropriateness, relevance, etc. So I'm self-editing all the time, sometimes writing lengthy pieces and then cutting them – sometimes just sitting in front of the computer screen and letting the images and stories flow through me – and eventually choosing what and how much to write.

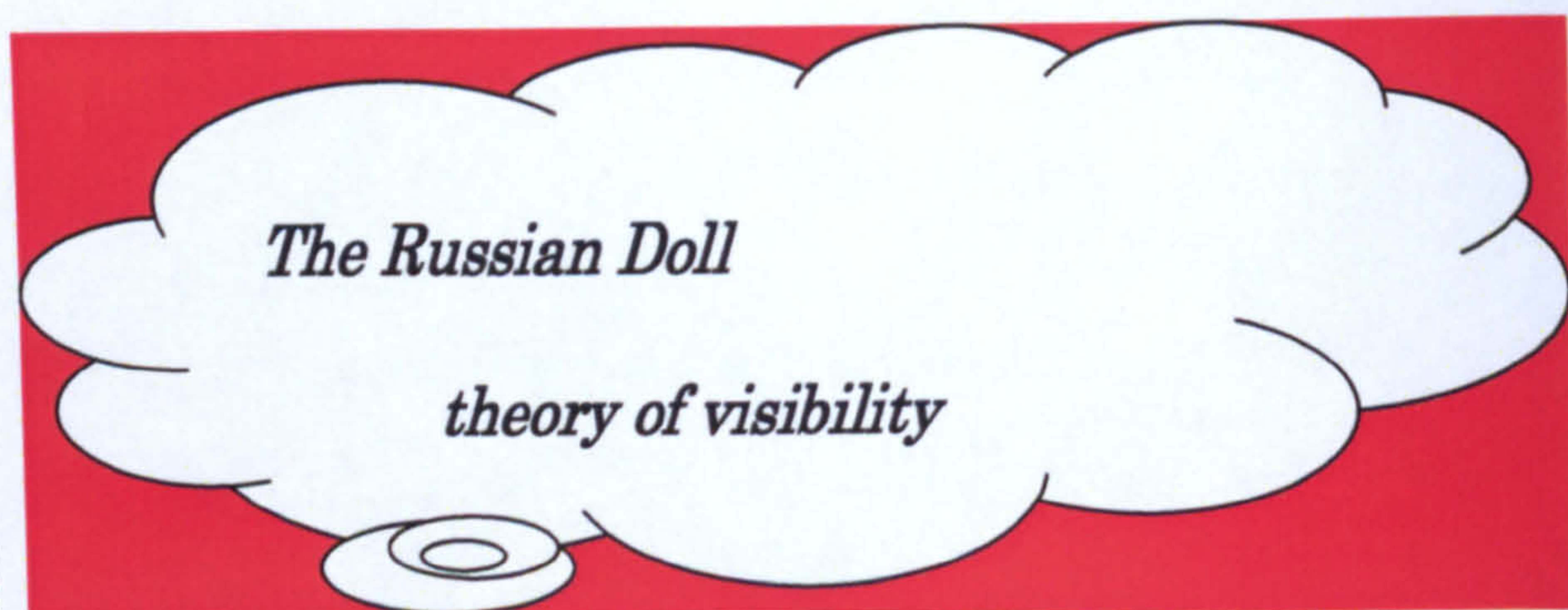
What is emerging – sometimes blinking – into the 'light' of being seen and then maybe being shown to others is a real choice of how I am beginning to learn to be differently visible.

It doesn't feel like that challenging, in-your-face, 'look at me' sort of visibility that I was trying out all those years ago on the MSc. Even though I know I'm trying out new ways of writing along with wanting to challenge the norms of research in academia. But it's not primarily about 'look at me' – or 'aren't I clever?' – even though I'm sure that's in there.

It's more 'WOW!!' This is really exciting and interesting and makes me want to explore further and deeper and wider – really test the limits – but quietly.

(Personal journal, 27 May 2008)

One of the images that came up after writing the above was of a set of wooden Russian dolls I played with during my childhood – one doll within another, within another, within another ... I couldn't recall where this was, or who they belonged to, though remembered they were called Babushkas. The following journal entry was made the next day:



*There's the Big One out front that everyone sees first –
they may know there are others inside
but they don't know*

- ◆ *how many*
- ◆ *what they look like*
- ◆ *etc ...*

*So I used to go out there into the world
as the big Mama Doll ...
smiling ... confident ... knowing what's what ...
and all the others could stay
safely tucked away
out of sight
unless safe enough
to emerge ...*

(Personal journal, 28 May 2008)

I tried out the theory on some of my co-researchers and two of them responded by sending me their own sets of Russian Dolls as inspirations. One group of seven, from Lynn, has been standing (see over) on the table in my 'hut' in the garden where I sometimes read and write in good weather. Another smaller group of five, from Jane, is on the windowsill in the room where I'm currently writing, with the rain lashing against the window.



First letter to visible women

(An amalgamated version of my first letter to the visible woman, sent between November 2007 and January 2008; two of the seven had already participated with me in an assignment on Narrative Interviewing)

Dear ...

I'm sending these [email attachments] like letters because it helps to keep me (and you) in informal chat rather than academic paper mode – at least I hope it does. What I'm hoping for is a sort of ongoing email 'conversation' with you and the other women involved about aspects of what it's like to be you, now.

*My provisional dissertation title is **VISIBLE WOMEN: STORIES OF AGE, GENDER AND IN/VISIBILITY**. Very basically, I'm interested in exploring the experiences of older women (we're all in our 50s and 60s) and how visible or invisible we feel in the world – why this is – how different it may be in different environments – what's going on with people close to us – how is any of this different from how things were in the past. In other words, I want you to tell me stories about 'stuff'!*

Seven women have agreed to take part, with different backgrounds but all having led what I would describe as 'interesting' lives. So far I've started email dialogues with [number] others. I'm using my own experience in my research, so will be including my own side of the dialogue and inviting questions back from you as part of what we're doing.

I'll start the whole thing off with very open questions, which you can answer (or not) in whatever way you choose. If other, more pertinent questions occur to you, then answer those instead – or if mine just lead to more questions (such as 'why ask me that?') then that's fine as well! Also feel free to send things like poems, drawings, photos or whatever else seems relevant to you.

So here are my starters:

a) In the context of becoming/being an 'older woman' (whatever that means to you – and I'd be interested in that as well) what does being 'visible' or 'invisible' mean to you? Have you thought about this before? Does it matter to you?

b) What's it like being you now, at the age you now are, living the life you now lead? Who, what and where are the people, things and places that are important to you – and why?

c) Are there major differences between your current life and the way you feel about it (and yourself) and the life you led previously? e.g. [examples for each woman from my current knowledge of their lives, such as having changed employment, retired, experienced illness, moved, etc.] If so, what are the stories you would like to tell about these differences?

I know that these are such open questions that you could probably write a book or two in answer, but (if you're happy to answer them) pick the main things/thoughts/images that come up for you and tell me about them. Your answers can be as long or as short as you want – and we can just see how it goes. Please ask back any questions (including personal ones) that you want to.

The timescale is very open, but I'm intending to spend this year having the 'conversations' in one way or another, whilst continuing my reading and other research. So please don't feel pressurised into starting before you're ready.

Thanks for agreeing to do this. I look forward to what comes next and to hearing from you when you've had time to think about it all.

Christine

*The idea that memory is linear is nonsense.
What we have in our heads
is a collection of frames.*

*As to time itself – can it be linear
when all these snatches of other presents
exist at once in your mind?*

A very elusive and tricky concept, time.

*... you realise that
while you're divided from your youth by decades,
you can close your eyes and summon it at will.*

(Penelope Lively, 2009: 10)

The stories

*Each time I told the story,
the details were different.
She didn't seem to mind
what was fact
and what was not.*

(Itani, 2008: 136)

Lynn

It could be dangerous

being noticed

in our household

(Lynn)



LYNN

by
Lynn

Aged 65 in June
plump
pink and purple hair

Married for 36 years
second marriage
first lasted 6 years

One son - married

One of four children
two of whom are stiffs
Very family minded

Began life in a small town in Essex
that place is the home of my soul
the woods and fields
were a marvellous playground

My father was a binge alcoholic
I'm not sure what to say really

I've been counselling since I was about 4
and began training when I was 34
I was a terrible rescuer

After lots of training
I became less intense

I've done a bit of clown training
I love
the theatre and cinema - reading - playing bridge
the countryside - London - travel - staying at home
friends - family - animals
good food - nice wine
and the odd adventure

Is that enough?

(autobiographical details 'for publication' sent by Lynn, 15.04.09
at the end of our correspondence)

Subject: visible/invisible

WOW! I bet you never thought the day would come! This makes me visible doesn't it?

As I'm the master of visible/invisible I need to find new ways of hiding and being seen.

(Lynn, email 23.01.08)

This was Lynn's first ever email, sent after we had talked on the phone and face-to-face and she had agreed to be a co-researcher – and I had sent her my first 'visible' letter on 09.01.08 (by ordinary mail, as she did not then have an email address). I told her letters could be written in any medium she chose, but she was determined to 'have a go'.

Subject: visible/invisible

WOW indeed! And I'm very impressed to be your first ever email correspondent. I shall be interested to see if / how you manage to disappear into the wallpaper on email.

(Christine, email 23.01.08)

Lynn sent five letters between that first internet contact and when we ended this correspondence in April 2009. Four were sent as emails and were about a page long; letter number three came as five handwritten pages, produced whilst she was in Canada and full of news and thoughts - which were a delight to receive on her return.

She is the woman I know best out of the seven, as we did our psychotherapy training together years ago and have been colleagues and become friends since then. We talked about the need for 'boundaries' for this visible women work and it has been an interesting addition to our relationship, including making elements of each of us and our histories more visible to the other.

(First letter from Lynn, 07.02.08)

Unseen/seen

At the age of sixty three
similar things are as important
to me
as at age two
but with different emphasis

I am not now fighting any more
to please EVERYONE
ALL OF THE TIME
*The freedom of giving myself a choice
rather than other people
making choices for me*

As a 'mistake'
and the youngest of four
I was overwhelmed by the need
for acceptance
and to be seen
as worthy of life

My parents
took any opportunity
to row
and I would be used
as their tennis ball
*I had to please them
didn't dare make a fuss*

I sat perfectly still
staring into the fire
I knew if I sat still
and let the conversation change
no-one taking any notice of me
I could slither away

It is usually
my family of origin
that causes me problems
about being grown up
which is normal I guess

(Christine, 11.03.08)

I really liked your heading of 'unseen/seen'...

Tell me some more about being overwhelmed ...

and what it's like not fighting to please

EVERYONE ALL OF THE TIME.

That bit about sitting perfectly still and staring into the fire so as to be 'unseen' is incredibly powerful ... I feel a bit shivery.

How does it sound to you now?

Being their tennis ball ...

What did they do?

Could you avoid it by disappearing?

How are you different with your family now?

My family – especially my father – kept on being unavailable.

I made resolutions not to get hooked into 'If only ...'

but kept wanting what I couldn't have.

I chose partners who behaved like my family ...

then there's the challenge of not quietly disappearing

and hoping everything will sort itself out.

With David now I regularly practice 'being seen'

so neither of us disappear.

(Lynn, 02.05.08)

Acceptance

The acceptance I yearned for
A respect perhaps
tenderness

a right to exist

Rarely from my father
My Mother loved me
I knew that
but also that I was
a nuisance

*'Oh, you are a pest!'
should have been my middle name*

Being told I was a mistake
made utter sense

I learned to keep quiet

Shared a room
with Jenn
ten years older
who loved me
and would scream at me

probably quite rightly

Aged ten I met Jenn's future husband
and bathed in the glow
of being seen as
'pretty - intelligent - fun - good mannered'
Roy stood up for me

*He appeared to enjoy
being with me*

I shone in his company

The difficulty was
I couldn't disappear very well
with him

Everyone behaved differently
No rows
Yippee!!

*Some of this I had all but forgotten
and was quite painful ...*

(Christine, 28.05.08)

Good to talk about what's emerging
whilst you struggle with this 'visible women' business.

*What's it like as an adult to receive
tenderness ... and acceptance?*

As you said, you're a bit older in letter no. 2

How did you know Jenn loved you?

What made it difficult to disappear with Roy?

For me as a child not so much a pest
as not the right shape to fit the hole.

Maybe supposed to become my mother once she died.

Became adept at pretending to be things I wasn't ...

a complicated inner self well out of sight.

Did you do any of this?

In groups you often seem to be quietly watching
not needing 'Me, me, what about me!!' like most of us.
And then you can suddenly become very visible indeed
assertive, funny, clowning ... insisting on discounts ...

What does this mean to you?

Just come up with a 'Russian Doll theory of visibility' ...

I think it's my version of T.A. theory

with vodka and dancing and lots of singing.

(Lynn's handwritten letter, August 2008)

Different stories

Back to some of your questions ...

Jenn showed tenderness at times
I would become clingy
and silently implore
'more, more, more'

Aged six
I fell off a roundabout onto concrete
and thought
'I'm in trouble for drawing attention to myself'

My uncle *ran* towards me
and lifted me up gently
and cleaned the blood away
He called me 'poor girl'
which took my breath away

My Mother
didn't look happy

Different stories I was told

My Mother said I was a mistake
but when I was born
she immediately loved me

My Father was irritated
by my presence in a room
but bought me large presents

I was an intrusion
but loved somewhat as well

I was determined that I would exist

Roy took my side
and saved my face
I was visible to him

My parents' unhappy marriage
and alcohol
meant the fall-out area was huge

It could be dangerous being noticed
in our household

Within a group now
it feels enough to be acknowledged
that I exist
I am happy not to be noticed particularly
unless doing my own performing!

Clowning is permission to perform
and scream out
'look at me - me - me!!'

*It's interesting
that I need the permission, isn't it?*

The odd bit of being assertive
is an adventure
It does feel very visible
but OK for a short time
I think it means a form of freedom

*It feels very strange to be writing this
in Oakville, Canada*

Looking up a cousin
not seen for fifty years

Meeting up with June
and family
has echoes of visible/invisible
*She looks so like my Mother
I was transfixed*

June is tactile - warm - interested - funny
She is worshipped carefully
within the family
There are rules
*I of course immediately reverted
to old habits*

In many ways
June is like Jenn
Quiet - firm - pleasant and welcoming
Then relaxes and becomes funny
and far more talkative

I'm still working all this through

(Christine, 21.10.08)

It's been ages since that lovely hand-written letter.

Our 'visible women' communicating continues in other ways
and the seven Russian dolls you lent are helping me on the desk.

When Jenn showed tenderness you wanted '*more – more – more*'

What happens now when shown tenderness?

It seems that, as children, most of us somehow make enough
sense of it all to survive (more or less) and not completely
disappear.

How did you reconcile the 'different stories' told?

Tell me more about the 'adventure' and 'freedom' of being
assertive.

Who is giving you the permission to perform now?

What's OK about being very visible then?

Your stories about June and the family are fascinating.

Sounds as though you did a lot better than reverting to 'old habits'
- remaining fully visible and adult despite the strange rules!

Do you know how you managed to do that?

Love your group email about being 'good at playing', and receiving
and answering other women's emails as 'like a wonderful sharing
game'.

What are you enjoying about the group exchanges?

Talking of playing, went to see 'Mamma Mia!' at Bridport's
Electric Palace last night ... full of women of all ages ... great
atmosphere ... Cosmo cocktails at the bar – reminded me of us
two in San Francisco!

After getting all seven women's permission, I started a series of emails in early September 2008 (see 'The Visible Group' below) inviting a group response to the experience of letter-writing and co-researching. Lynn initially joined in this very enthusiastically and then didn't respond to group and individual emails and I was unable to contact her by phone.

Subject: are you there?

Hope you're OK and have been getting my 'naming the visible women' emails. You seem to have gone strangely silent – though I'm sure not invisible. Anyway, everybody has now agreed they're happy for me to use their names, so hope you feel the same – but do let me know either way.

(Christine, email 28.10.08)

We eventually spoke on the phone and Lynn told me she had been “*trying out hiding behind the wallpaper*” on email, to see if it worked. We talked about what the *hiding* meant to each of us and Lynn said it was more of the “*being good at playing*” from her point of view; she wanted to see what would happen. I had to acknowledge all kinds of difficult feelings, from being worried when I didn't hear from her, then getting a bit upset, to eventually annoyed and affronted that my serious work was not being treated with proper respect ... and (at last) to feeling that what she was doing was not only relevant and interesting but also funny, and one of my reasons for asking Lynn to take part in the first place.

Subject: Visibles ...

I didn't really think you were being rude – not for long, anyway - though did begin to wonder what was happening ... and if I'd upset you ...

ANYWAY, glad to hear it was just you having a different go at being behind the wallpaper. And it sounds like it was quite a successful disappearing act, so well done!

(Christine, email 26.11.08)

(Lynn, 25.11.08)

Some answers to questions

I have been rather ignoring you haven't I?

I do believe

I've been behind the wallpaper

just to prove to myself

that I can still do it

How ridiculous is that?

But I didn't mean to ignore you

I humbly grovel at my stupidity

You asked me several questions

which I have thought about

in great depth

but only come up with a couple of answers

The stories of my birth

were rather like a proper debrief

but over a few years

with each person's perspective

The short version is

that the labour started early

my heart began to fail

then 6lbs 12oz of red face and black hair

was born at 7.50am on a Monday morning

*They all felt differently
about my arrival*

The question of tenderness

it seems to be easy or natural

for me to feel this

*But if someone presses me
I tend towards silence*

My ability to haggle

has always been there

It was worth a try even if it didn't work

I made the best of it if I didn't win

That word win says it really!!

Now it feels like a mini-adventure for me

Am I still trying to get my own way?

We were not allowed to sulk

(Christine, 13.01.09)

I wanted to come back to your disappearing behind the wallpaper
and my not knowing why ... or what to do ...

Should I persist in contact?

Childhood memories of friends who suddenly stopped talking to me

Needing to prove you can still disappear makes lots of sense!

But ... *Why did you decide to do it now?*

Your heart beginning to fail at birth is a very dramatic beginning.

What's your story about it?

What was the 'debrief' by your family?

You do seem very tender and gentle, which is why it's a surprise
when you're not. One of the delights of getting to know you was to
realise that you're very feisty.

J [our psychotherapy tutor] seemed to misread you - as though
she'd missed whole, very important bits of you out. That looked like
being pressed to me.

Is that right? Does it happen still?

Good question – about trying to get your own way.

How does it work between you and B [husband]?

You seem exceedingly gracious when you've 'won'!

More quietly visible stuff?

For me, it's about having my point of view heard and knowing that
it counts. Not having enough of that when growing up made me
feel as good as invisible ... that I didn't matter.

When I saw Lynn in February 2009, she told me a story about her new laptop computer. She was refusing to use it because every time she opened it up, it said B.... [husband's name] on the screen and she didn't feel it was anything to do with her. She would not be using it or sending emails until this was changed – and so far this was apparently proving difficult to do.

I sent out one or two more group emails in the early part of the year, including letting them all know that I was beginning to write the introductory parts of my dissertation and would be bringing our correspondence to a close. I 'chased up' Lynn in April for a possible final letter.

Subject: visible woman letters

This is sort of 'formal' notification that, as I'm now really getting into my writing, I'm beginning to bring the exchange of letters to an end. It would be really nice to have one more from you – if you can manage it! And thank you so much for your wonderfully creative and heartfelt contributions so far. I've loved getting them and responding to them.

My other request is – when you have time – could you let me have any brief, background autobiographical information that you would be happy to see as part of your story in these writings. Although I already know lots about you ... I'd like to know what you're happy to have made 'public'. Possible areas would be: age, current living arrangements, what you do now and what you used to do (work, play, etc.), anything relevant you want to say about marriage(s), sons, relationships, family history, roots etc. Hope this looks do-able. Let me know if it's not clear enough.

(Christine, email 13.04.09)

(Lynn, 15.04.09)

Here goes again ...

I'm so sorry I didn't answer your letter of January
I forgot all about it

Because I'm more immediate
in dealing with problems
or other expectations now
I rarely use the wallpaper method

It was an experiment
I was behaving rudely
and hoped you would understand

I am ever curious about my own
and others' stories
The 'birth debrief'
helped me make sense of how or why
people acted the way they did
Dad called me 'You'

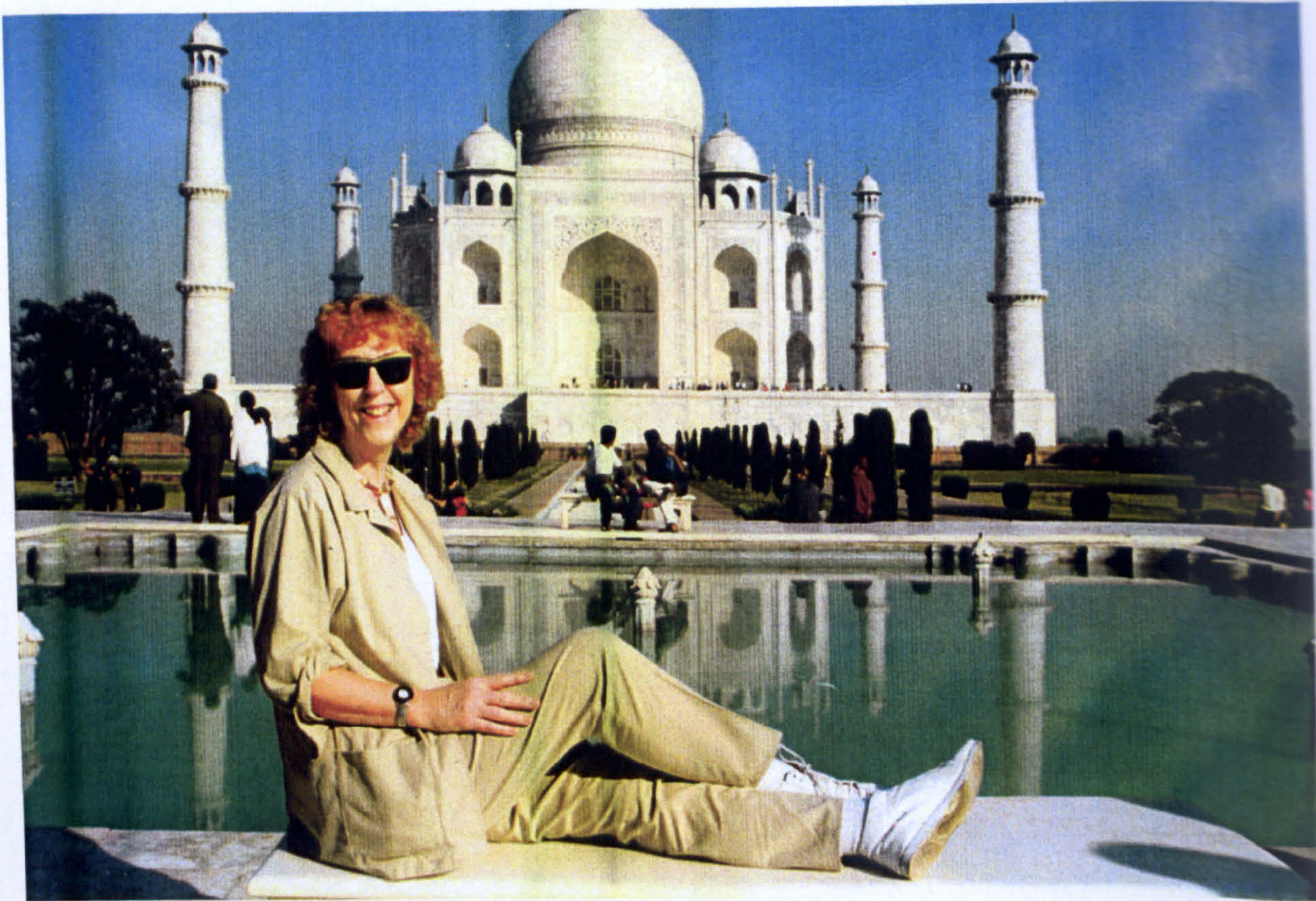
People often 'miss' me
only see my façade
You never have of course

When a child
visiting adults would often say
'Isn't she sweet?'
and wonder why Jenn
made snorting and sneering noises
Most of the time I'm not sweet!

Quietly visible ...
there are few things
I actually want
(perhaps I've been very lucky)
so when I DO want something
it's more important to me
to get my own way

To be heard
if the other person matters
I need to have my say
I need them to know

I hope that's enough of an answer
I have to go and lie down now!



Pat

*I feel in control of my life
and able to do
what I like
when I like*

(Pat)

PAT

by
Pat

Age 66 - will be 67 in November
don't mind getting older
just pleased to still be here!

I had a happy childhood
in Nottingham
My parents were a loving couple
an only child
they loved and supported me
so I was very lucky
helped me to be independent
and like my own company

My first job was at
the Central Reference Library
I already loved books
it was heaven!
helping people find
the information they wanted

I married too young
When I realised it was a mistake
after six months
I didn't have the nerve
to become 'a scarlet woman'
and get divorced
religious parents would have been horrified!

I spent years compromising
trying to make it work
Found out about
my husband's affairs
just before my second son was born

When the boys were at school
I started at BBC Radio Bristol
and gained some independence

Eventually I moved out
and met someone
who helped me regain myself

Regional organiser for CND
then music librarian and producer
at the BBC

which I still really enjoy

27 years
helping organise Glastonbury Festival

Living very happily
with my current partner
for 21 years
despite or because of
a 20 year age difference

We're both independent
like travelling
and been all over the world together

Studying Egyptology is a real passion

My grandparents and parents
died of cancer
when not much older than I am now

My younger son
died after an epileptic fit
two years ago
so the only family member
I have now
is my older son

We have a very good relationship

I've survived
two car crashes
two hip replacements
and a house fire

*I plan to make the most
of whatever life I have left*

(autobiographical details 'for publication' sent by Pat, 16.04.09
after the end of our correspondence)

Pat and I have known each other since the early 1980s, when we were both very involved in CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] and job-shared for a year as regional organisers. Since then, we have often not seen each other for long periods, but have always stayed in touch.

One of the maintaining interests and strengths of our relationship (and a reason for asking her to be a co-researcher) has been our different approaches to, and ways of dealing with, practical, organisational and emotional issues. We exchanged five letters over eight months. In November 2007, after agreeing to be one of my correspondents, Pat emailed:

Thank you for sending me your first questions – deceptively simple but will require some thinking about!

(Pat, 15.11.07)

Her next email, with her first letter (of four pages) attached, soon followed:

... I found it really difficult to write a coherent account of what I feel about myself! I'm used to accepting that I function and I don't analyze why, so I hope what I have written is along the lines you wanted. If not please let me know and I'll try again!

Also I know you said responses could be as short or as long as I liked – what is your definition of short/long?

(Pat, 27.11.07)

My response included:

This ... is exactly what I want – and very thought-ful. Not that I'd have expected anything else from you ... What a good question about my definition of short/long! Not sure that I've given it a lot of thought, but now that I do, short would be anything from a one word answer to a sentence or two – and I'd count what you have done as long (and very reflective).

(Christine, 28.11.07)

(first letter from Pat, 27.11.07)

Being 'an older woman'

I feel older - and don't feel older!
Don't feel any different
most of the time
from when I was younger
it seems irrelevant

Never thought
about being 'visible'
or 'invisible'
in relation to myself
I'm not given to analyzing myself

I don't need
a lot of positive feedback
in order to function

It's my opinion that is important to me

Perhaps being an only child
has made me self reliant
I like to be in control

Happy to be anonymous
when I choose
which is why I like living in a city

This point in my life
working only the hours I want
my brain still functioning
enough good friends
a satisfying social life
and a strong relationship
with S [partner] and A [older son]

I can only say
I don't feel invisible in any way
but realise
I'm in a fortunate position
being financially independent
and hope I don't end up
like one in five female pensioners
living below the poverty line

Asked friends of a similar age
if they felt invisible
their first reaction was 'yes'
but when we talked about it
they were missing
the admiring male glances

Perhaps it's a question of self-esteem?

I feel in control of my life
and able to do what I like
when I like

I always have a new project

We lead such privileged lives
in the western world

Don't find the idea of death distressing
but so many of my family died
without doing most of the things
they really wanted to
that I made a list of things to do
before dying

*I've done them all
and have a sense of completion*

Now fascinated and curious
about where mankind came from
and where it is heading
More chance to use my brain
than when younger and busy with 'life'

No problem now saying 'no'

The Egyptology course
just completed
was pure delight

I think my next career move
will be to become a practising Hedonist!
I've worked all my life
and can now be selfish and indulge myself
without feeling guilty
as long as I'm not a burden to anyone

*I feel really fortunate
to still be alive and healthy*

(Christine, 17.12.07)

Really enjoyed your responses to my 'deceptively simple questions' ... and your questions back ... the start of our two-way 'conversation'.

You asked for my definition of being an 'invisible older woman'.

The more I read and think, the less clear I become!

Maybe it's more about believing what gets said than what actually happens ... a feeling of not being given the attention one would like.

It's about much more than literally 'being seen' ... includes our right to be here and taken into account ... and the choice *not* to be visible or have too much attention sometimes.

Why do you think it seems so important to be told we look younger than the age we are?

I agree that self-esteem seems an important part of being visible. You appear to quietly choose your own level of visibility.

Where does this confidence come from?

Being in control and able to say 'no' sound very important to who and how you are. You've had many reasons to feel bruised or hard-done-by over the years, yet you never seem to.

How does this link to your sense of visibility now?

How amazing – to make a list of things to do before dying!

What was on your list?

What's that 'sense of completion' like for you?

(Pat, 31.12.07)

Feminists used to complain
about being regarded as sex objects
now they are older
they seem to be complaining
about not being regarded as sex objects!

Is it about status?
Not having an important role in life?

What kind of attention do women want?
Do they feel used and unappreciated?
Empty nest syndrome?
Lack of fertility after the menopause?
Struggling to cope with caring for parents?

Seems to me
that low self-esteem plays a large part
in people's perceptions of their visibility

TV and newspapers
have hours and pages to fill
and discussing why older women feel invisible
assumes that they are in the first place

You've set me thinking
Since you asked me to do this
have noticed numerous articles and programmes
which I might have ignored in the past
and the topic is fascinating

I know you want personal experiences
so will try and relate it
to my life!

In the past
reaching 40 was an achievement
and age and its appearance was prized
Who would now choose to look old?

I'll take care of my body
and make myself look attractive
because that pleases me
not because I'm trying
to pass as younger
but physical age is not beautiful

Not sure it's my vanity
stopping me identifying as 'old'
I think the goal posts have moved

But ...
older women are much more likely than men
to be poor and considered invisible ...
there is a lot of negative stereotyping

Having a sense of control
is very important to me - and everyone
*just small choices
can improve well being*

Perhaps it's the attitudes of a lot of males
in society that is the problem?

I regained my independent spirit
after my divorce
it took some time to realise
I was entitled to my opinions

I spent all the money
from my share of the house
on travel
to places and cultures
I wanted to experience
and don't regret a penny of it

My parents both died of cancer
without fulfilling
their hopes and plans
to travel
*I had an insatiable travel lust
when I wrote the list!*

Having ticked off the list
gives me a sense of completion
I won't lie on my death bed
full of regrets
for things I haven't done

My aim has always been to do things
that interest stimulate and satisfy me
and I feel I've done that

In this second (nine-page) letter, Pat reflected on - and put forward ideas, arguments, statistics and questions about - a whole range of issues around ageing, gender, poverty, status, self-esteem, appearance, the consumer society, politics, the 'Baby Boomer generation'. She had clearly (as I anticipated) put a great deal of thought into what she was writing and quoted from a wide variety of sources, including friends and colleagues, newspapers, the internet, books, films, social policy documents, etc. In her accompanying email she said:

... Christmas [the first since son C's death] passed very quietly ... Because I had some time off work I was able to spend a day on writing my response to you – I thought I'd get as much in as possible because our first Glastonbury Management meeting is on Jan 23rd and I have a lot of preparatory work to do for that, so my time will be more limited in future.

Hope I haven't strayed too far off the point!

(Pat, 31.12.07)

Pat's 'Travel List' took up the last two pages of her letter; this included *"the places I really wanted to go to – and they all lived up to my expectations. Now although there are still places I'd like to visit, I don't feel the same compulsion."* There were 35 items on the list, from walking on the Great Wall of China to *"buying a ticket for the first commercial (affordable) space flight. I have a reservation with Thomson's but don't realistically think it is a desire I will be able to fulfil!"* She ended with:

"My list also included some lifestyle decisions which I've tried to incorporate ever since.

Find a job I really enjoy

Make time to read all the books I want (never going to achieve this!)

Discover something new every day

Enjoy every day – and celebrate every birthday I survive – I feel I owe it to all the family and friends who are no longer alive not to moan about life. I can be sad (as over the death of C [son]) but not whinge about the little things"

(Christine, 08.01.08)

So many things to comment on that I'm not quite sure where to start! It also brings up lots of my own stories as well ...

How sad that 'being visible' for many women seems to depend mostly on being seen as sexually desirable ...

Status also seems very important for many people ... since more or less retiring I've become more aware of who keeps in touch, who goes on valuing *me* rather than what I 'do'.

What's your experience of this?

Don't link fertility with being 'a proper woman' but certainly didn't enjoy my menopause ... unlike you, I had many unpleasant symptoms. Felt most of me was invisible, despite apparently coping well ... made bad decisions, especially around relationships.

You asked if I had 'a starting age for being old' – the answer is 'no'! Agree about goal posts being moved ... 40 ... 50 ... 60 ... all seemed significant, but not 'old'. Perhaps to do with the 'sense of oneself', being visible to oneself?

Is this just another expression for 'self-esteem'?

... and there are important issues you mention of health, finance, relative privilege etc.

Your list ... hadn't realised how single-mindedly you made sure it happened. Always admired and respected this in you – as well as finding it a bit formidable.

Do you know how you are able to be so clear minded – and entitled to your own opinions?

(Pat, 01.02.08)

Too many women
hyper-analyze the events in their lives
and many seem to feel
they need a man to fulfil them

My instincts are always
to sort out any problems I have
and plan a course of action

It's much easier
to be straight
and say what you think/feel/want

It's no good agonizing
because someone hasn't done what you want
if they didn't know what you wanted
in the first place!

If we aren't visible to ourselves
we will inevitably feel invisible to others
but we're becoming
self-absorbed in pondering
the meaning of a twinge of sadness

*Perhaps being depressed
makes women feel invisible?*

Never been depressed
Always been able
to control my emotions
it's not that I don't feel things deeply
but it's just the way I was made
*Only remember losing my temper
once in my life*

You always seem in control
because you are good at talking
about how you feel in a rational way

Do you think you aren't single-minded?
You always achieve
what you set out to do

In what way do you find me formidable?
I don't like the idea of being formidable
even only a bit!

Very rarely think about the past

I couldn't write an autobiography
that covered more than a page
I do get mental images
they are usually snapshots
of good things that have happened

There's always been
a positive part of me
that no-one can touch
perhaps my sense of self?

Always been my own best friend
I know what is best for me
My inner voice is positive and rational

Being an only child
made me self-sufficient
and happy with my own company
More interested in the outside world
and other people
than thinking about myself and my life

I like a stress-free life
good at reducing problems to lists
Don't let things go
round and round in my head
If I can't change something
I will change the way I think about it

Try to make people feel better
about themselves
because I feel so grateful
that I'm OK with myself and life

Lucky to have been born
with an optimistic easy going outlook
to parents who loved each other
and me

A poem learned by heart
made an impression
when I was about 12
and still think it applies
I'm sure you know it!

If - by Rudyard Kipling

(Christine, 04.03.08)

Quite often depressed ... difficult to plan courses of action then. Sometimes being invisible is exactly what I want ... not to have to respond to anybody. Mostly able to develop a sort of 'visible persona' to take into the world ... people don't see the depressed me behind it.

One of the things motivating this research is anger at the way some older, successful, visible women seem to have turned on other women ... *What are your thoughts on this?*

I can understand not liking the idea of being 'formidable' ... not intended negatively, more about the way you do things – remaining very clear, logical and rational.

What does it mean to you?

Am told some people find me formidable (and single-minded) – being passionate and enthusiastic about things. Your rational way of getting there seems more overt than my often circuitous route!

As a child, the lesson drummed in was to put everybody else's needs ahead of mine ... or not to have any needs. Adapted to whoever I was living with, shutting myself and my unhappiness away. I kept looking to see what people wanted/expected ... then tried to do it and be it.

Sounds as though your parents lived what they taught you ... and you've chosen to learn and develop it in your own way.

What does your love of new information give you?

(Pat, 21.03.08)

You are very good at
concealing your depression
Do you know what causes it?
*How do you overcome it
as opposed to covering it up?*

Never considered you
as being formidable
Far too approachable and empathetic

I have a friend who gets very depressed
but only when she is on her own
Think I'm her voice of reason!
Never tell her what to do
but try to offer
a positive interpretation
She tells me it turns out right

Men are better at compartmentalising
and can put doubt to one side
Women will worry away
and magnify the doubt

I don't know how to be any other way
than clear logical and rational
If there is something I want to do
will work towards achieving it

I have no real sense
of where the positive part of me comes from
lucky genes - supportive parents
Always expecting the best
but planning for the worst

Am intrigued by the way
other people think and act
especially the 'worriers'

So many people spend their time
telling themselves they are failures
I happily allow myself 'time off'
to indulge in 'doing nothing'
without feeling guilty

Don't have a critical
haranguing inner voice
don't give myself a hard time

If I feel down
give myself a pep talk
and get on with sorting it out

C's [son] death leaves an empty space
but I feel lucky to have had him
for as long as I did
with many happy memories
to keep him alive

I set realistic goals
very good at not procrastinating
Sense of achievement when I succeed
a new challenge if I fail

Always been fascinated
about the development of the human race
the rise and fall of ancient civilisations
Still travelling
in terms of exploring the world of knowledge

'A thrill beyond description'
is exactly how I feel on discovering
a new way of looking at things
when isolated pieces of information
fit together to make a coherent whole

Only sadness is there will never be time
to read all the books I want to!

(Christine, 24.04.08)

Gathering so much from all these conversations – amazingly rich.

Good at ‘concealing’ my depression because I’ve lived with it so long. Never sure what causes it ... early losses? ... nothing ever talked about ... sense of being unimportant ... a strong need to ‘understand’ things ...

Is it only women who magnify their doubts?

I know plenty of men who worry away and magnify things, too!

Struggling to understand what it’s like to feel ‘clear, logical and rational’ – I think people value this highly in you, and want some of it ...

What’s it like to be with people who aren’t like that?

Aware of how different your ‘achieving’ sounds to my own approach.

Can you say how you ‘work towards achieving it’?

Am definitely neurotic, with that ‘critical haranguing inner voice’!

How do your pep talks work for you?

Your approach to C’s death always sounds very rational, though I know you feel things deeply, too.

What’s it like when other people get upset about C?

Interested in when you started developing your social concerns.

Where does your love of books come from?

Do you know your family history around education and rights, particularly for women?

When Pat and I discussed her being one of my co-researchers, she was enthusiastic but made it clear that it would not be an open-ended correspondence. She had limited time, particularly when involved in the months of preparatory organisation for the Glastonbury Festival.

Sending her my fifth letter in April (above) I said:

No doubt you're well into the fray now, so I won't expect any further letters from you for a while. When you have time for some reading, here's my next letter. It's great grappling with all of this!

(Christine, 24.04.08)

Pat responded in July, after the Festival:

Very sorry for the long silence – Glastonbury just absorbs all my free time ... Now all I have got to do is write all my reports and then I can reply to your last response!

(Pat, 11.07.08)

Her fifth letter arrived later that month:

Hope this isn't too scrappy but I do feel I'm running out of insights to give you!

(Pat, 29.07.08)

(Pat, 29.07.08)

It has been fascinating
but think I am coming to the end
of what I can usefully say about myself

Over the months
have tried to take a
*good look at myself
and my motivations*

Can only conclude that
I don't have a lot of the emotional baggage
some people carry around with them

Find talking about myself boring
Waste of time?
Unproductive?
More interested
in what other people do and think

I like to 'understand' things too
but are we talking about
the same 'understand' and 'things'?
I want to learn about everything ...

The men I know
seem much better at taking action
than most of the women
ruminating over events/problems

*Only theoretical knowledge
of what it's like to be depressed*

If you feel a lack of self-worth
where does your confidence
to share your ideas with others
come from?

Can't think of any other way to explain
what it's like to be me
and be clear logical and rational!

Sometimes find it emotionally exhausting
just to listen to friends
agonizing over a situation
Don't like putting things off

Who do you think is going to find you out?
As long as I've done my best
it doesn't matter what other people think

Don't understand how a pep talk
can reinforce your sense of being rubbish
Change your script writer!

I'm great at making lists
and prioritising ...
*being in control of my reactions
to events I'm not in control of*

Always felt the same way
about social commitment
Born with a book in my hands
It's a very selfish hobby
read anything and everything

I know very little
about my family history
My mother was a Barnado's orphan
She and my father
continued educating themselves

Everyone has their own way
of dealing with grief
C died knowing he loved
and was loved
*no arguments unresolved
harsh words or silences to regret*

This was Pat's final letter and I sent a brief email response:

Many thanks ... it wasn't scrappy at all, but it sounds as though you've had enough now ... all sorts of things I'd love to say in response to your various comments and no doubt we could do some of that when we meet.

(Christine, 29.07.08)

We met the following month and acknowledged that we had reached the end of our email 'conversation'. Pat agreed to be part of a limited email contact with the other six women co-researchers, saying: *"I don't want to have to write too much – really not got anything more to say"*.



Alison

*Transition seems to have
been a constant
in the last few years*

(Alison)

Alison

by
Alison

I am a 65 year old woman
living in south-east London

Still 'on the cusp'
of working life and retirement

I live alone
but people often come and stay
visitors to the
Buddhist Centre
round the corner

Sharing my house with others
is a pleasure to me

My garden is important
I love the process
as much as the results

Walking and singing
are enjoyable and fulfilling

Following a Buddhist path
is the most important aspect
of my life

I continually reflect on ways
to devote time and energy to that
while spending time
with 'old' and newer friends

(autobiographical details 'for publication' sent by Alison, 18.04.09,
at the end of our correspondence)

Alison and I met in the mid-1990s as part of a team on an innovative programme at King's College Department of General Practice, working to support and develop GPs in 'difficult' practices in south-east London. With previous experience of working within the NHS, we were recruited to facilitate Action Learning Sets and other developmental initiatives with GPs. We both continued with individual and group support work in general practice and remained in contact with each other over the years.

Among her other professional talents, Alison is a writer on mental health issues and has published two well-reviewed books based on her own and her interviewees' personal experiences of the suicide of a family member and recovering from a subarachnoid haemorrhage.

She quickly agreed to become one of my co-researchers and said it would be good to be 'interviewed' for a change. *"I am ready and willing to engage in email discourse! ... and feel honoured to be a participant contributor ."*

In sending her my initial letter, I said:

There really aren't any 'rules' to this – it's not the usual sort of academic research and I'm pretty much making it up as I go along, so am very happy for questions, challenges, or whatever else occurs to you!

(Christine, 15.01.08)

(Alison, 29.01.08)

I found your questions helpful
and welcome the opportunity
to reflect on my life now
and where it might be going

How did I get to be 64?
I don't feel it
though how is one supposed to feel?

Can't see myself living here
as a 'really old' woman
Struggle to feel at ease
in an often noisy
litter-strewn community
where I sometimes feel invisible

Just finished writing a book
and wondering what to do next
Not yet ready to give up paid work
Three words come to mind
transitional ... uncertain ... unclear

Going to India
on a Buddhist pilgrimage
with an open mind
to see what comes up
Maybe this will be a transition?

Transition seems to have been
a constant in the last few years

A brain haemorrhage
followed by a second one
where I was close to death
survived knowing my life had to change

Couldn't go on being work ... work ... work

Not comfortable
living with the feeling
life is constantly changing

Impermanence is central to Buddhism

*Family are important
but in a 'difficult' way*

My sister took her own life
My parents died
My brother recently had a stroke
left his wife
and is very dependent on me

Strong bonds with close friends
some known for over 50 years
with a shared past
Despite different values
when we meet
there is much laughter and joy

Jamyang Buddhist Centre
singing in a choir
walking seriously
resting - reading - lounging in bed
an annual visit to Cortijo Romero
All important things in my life

My home and garden
a refuge and sanctuary
offering peace and silence
I find noise difficult now

Try to be compassionate
towards my mind
when it doesn't work as well
as it used to
less at the mercy of my feelings

Currently struggle
with what clothes to wear
and perhaps how visible or not
I want to be

Proud of my new book
but wary of looking for glory
not very Buddhist!

(Christine, 13.02.08)

Look forward to your experience of 'this welcome opportunity to reflect'. Seems to be an unexpected aspect of these conversations for some.

Interested in how the feeling of being 'transitional' influences your sense of visibility or place in the world.

Is there any tie to your following the Buddhist path?

'Difficult' family relationships ...

How do you think your family see you?

The importance of friends, laughter and joy ...

What is it about being with friends that supports your own sense of yourself?

Singing and walking are important to me, too – like getting to know oneself differently.

Were they part of your life before being so ill?

What does 'serious walking' on your own give you?

Tell me some more about the experience of being surrounded by 'a Babel of tongues' where you live ...

and sometimes feeling invisible because of it.

Glad you are able to be proud of your new book. You don't seem like somebody 'looking for glory' ...

but is this part of you at all?

Most of us have hankered after a bit of glory occasionally!

(Alison, 21.04.08)

An extraordinary visit
to India last month
will contribute to
my continuing reflections

Started thinking
how I could be visible
in presence ... actions ... behaviour

What do you think it means
to be 'visible'?
What might be going on
for the person doing the seeing?

Work helps me feel visible
in the world
it matters to me
and will be felt as a major loss

Would like to be more visible
in the way I dress
Usually wear clothes
which enable me not to be noticed

Admire the clothes you wear
which are often striking

Highly visible in India
often the only white westerners
on the 'Buddhist trail'
Them staring at us staring at them
It felt very comfortable
*Does being part of a group
confer individual invisibility?*

More certain now
that I want to follow the Buddhist path
Offers a coherent set
of moral and ethical values
being mindful of inevitable death
being responsible for ourselves

With my brother
I have created his dependency
and am learning about
'compassionate detachment'

With my friends
I can be 'me' ... myself ...
accepted warts and all
in contrast to being highly self-critical

Tend to worry a lot in the night
Perhaps because of depression
am a lark rather than an owl

Often make myself visible
by talking about myself
Can be witty and amusing
but it's not congruent
with Buddhist focusing on others

Would this mean being less visible?

In this multi-ethnic neighbourhood
feel I 'belong' in our row of six houses
but beyond that
still feel invisible
particularly when out on my own
Is it something about being single?

I do look for glory
sometimes
but hope my book fits
the Buddhist idea of
benefit to all sentient beings

(Christine, 17.05.08)

Currently happily gathering stories and not thinking 'dissertation'. It's become my inquiry into what's important at this stage of my/our lives.

I think the most important 'person doing the seeing' becomes oneself, rather than external onlookers – *not about the eyes of the world.*

Thank you for noticing (and liking) what I wear. Clothes matter to me, though I was brought up to believe that was wrong!

What would you like to change about your clothes?

Why was it 'comfortable' to be stared at in India?

Work does seem to provide a form of 'visibility' – though have been surprised not to miss it or the apparent status.

What will be the major losses for you?

When you went back into the world after your craniotomies ...

How did you do this? How did you feel?

How do you now cope with the 'mental fatigue'?

Buddhist concepts ... 'compassionate detachment' ...

Where does this come into your behaviour towards yourself and your worries?

You have always seemed very hospitable and open. I'm very protective of my space and need to know that I can be alone when needed.

How do you manage sharing your space with others?

(Alison, 23.06.08)

The physical act
of looking at myself
is always strange
Not sure what I'm seeing

Nearly always assume
a critical kind of 'seeing'
by others

Comfortable being stared at
in India
as part of a group
Did I feel slightly superior?

Sometimes in groups
I like being visible
to be in the forefront
Could be a better listener

Would like to look more elegant
but could never spend a lot on clothes

Since finishing the book
I sit and wait for 'desires' to arise
Money 'coming in'
matters a lot
Is voluntary work enough?
Have I earned the right to retire?

Very pre-occupied with
whether my mind is ageing
appropriately
Like seeing a brain scan
the mind watching the brain

Don't cope well with mental fatigue
I've written about
my 'tools for recovery'
in my book

Have gone back to
my 'Can't Sing' Choir

When people leave
after sharing my space
I always reclaim it for myself

(Christine, 31.07.08)

Back from two weeks in the USA for a big family celebration – cousin's 50th wedding anniversary – large extended family I'd never met.
As I get older, saying goodbye to people who live a long way away gets harder ... *a whispered thought that it might be the last time I see them.*

Visibility ... and my history ... how important it feels to actually *see* the people I care about.

Not sure I believe people who say they don't care about how they're seen.

How could you see yourself more compassionately?

Don't miss the verbal and other attention from men as I get older – seems like a real advantage of *not* being seen in that way.

What's your experience of this?

When we first met, I found you very confident and outgoing – unlike me.

What do you get from 'being in the forefront'?

How could you be a better listener?

Always loved singing – about connectedness within myself as well as with others.

Have you always sung? What do you enjoy?

(Alison, 03.09.08)

Lovely to hear about your trip
and extended family
Made me feel quite envious!

How did you keep it together as a child?

When we first met
thought you incredibly confident
clever and successful!

Sometimes feel like a small child
Look at me ... notice me!
Don't remember
feeling particularly loved
as a child

Recently had a new haircut
and bought some new
non-charity shop clothes
thinking about softer swirlier skirts

Never sought or attracted
that sort of male attention
but now enjoy being offered
a seat on public transport!

A summer of 'no desires'
no energy or enthusiasm
for usual pursuits

Trying to work out
what a meaningful existence might be
for my life as it is now
*retirement as opportunity
rather than threat?*

Sung in school choirs and church
Can't remember why I stopped
Music can be fun
and very moving
Energy, enjoyment, relaxation

(Christine, 07.10.08)

From our 'group' emails, you will have gathered that Sara is the cousin who had the 50th wedding anniversary in the US.

Not sure how I kept it together as a child ... mostly by retreating into my head ... a very full fantasy life ... invented family history.

How did not feeling loved manifest for you as a child?

What's it like for you not to be noticed?

Sounds like some physically visible things are going on!

Any softer swirlier skirts yet materialised?

'Post-book publication depression' ...

Interested to hear more ...

(Alison, 31.10.08)

More or less housebound
with sciatica
and wondering
are the illnesses of old age invisible?

So few attractive clothes
for older women
Are we meant to be invisible/dowdy?
Confused about how I want to look

Not sure what 'love' means
for children or adults
Mother not very demonstrative
Father domineering and unpredictable

Homesick when first
sent away to school
but what was I missing?

Find it hard
to put my own needs to one side
and focus on the other person
*Don't know what it's like
not to be noticed*

Post-book depression
includes the gap of a major focus
Hard to accept as 'true'
the positive feedback from friends
... but very nice review attached

Trying to believe
voluntary work at the Buddhist Centre
is as much needed and appreciated
as writing a book

Told a GP friend
about a hospital mix-up
'Why didn't you tell them who you are?'
Laughed and said
Well, who am I?

In late November Alison sent some information and postcards of paintings from 'WOW!! Wild Old Women' art exhibition in London (Nov 2008-Jan 2009).

*There is a myth that women slowly begin to disappear as they age ...
What an absurd vicious and laughable rumour;
what UTTER NONSENSE.
We are loud, we are raucous and we are thrillingly, vividly visible.*
(WOW!! press release – McNicol, 2008)

(Christine, 28.11.08)

Various ailments that can come with being older seem invisible – loss of hearing, reduced vision, all sorts of aches and pains – along with the 'grin and bear it' approach ... so people get impatient.

As an older woman have felt more confident about how I look ... didn't know how to find my own style when young ... much more choice now.

What's your clothes history/story?

When away from family – and couldn't wait to be away – it was the *idea* of companionship and love that I missed (and seldom experienced).

Have you always experienced being noticed?

Fantastically good review of your book – you write so well.

How do you measure your voluntary work?

Loved the WOW!! stuff and hope to be able to go and see it.

(Alison, 11.01.09)

Christmas was
*too much of everything
and too little silence*

Then a week at Cortijo Romero
being a 'grumpy old woman'
not wanting to be part
of the group
usually the highlight of my year

Been wondering about 'love'
and 'compassion'
and what they mean

Not being part of Well-Land
was perhaps a rehearsal
for the infirmities of old age?

Don't want to be one of
the 'invisible' older patients
a burden and not very interesting

Memories of clothes as a child
Dearly loved tartan trousers
Pink velvet party cloak
and matching dresses with lace collars
My sister and I
were close in age
and often wore twinnish clothes

As an adult
not much of a story with clothes
No energy currently to 'dress up'

Feeling depressed that this book
will not have the same impact
as my previous one
nor lead to the same invitations
to train - lecture - appear on TV

Sorry this is rather grumpier than usual

(Christine, 15.02.09)

Been really ill with chest infection and didn't go out of the house for two weeks. Finally emerged clutching David's arm and feeling like an old woman ... talk about feeling invisible ... and missing out on things!

What does being part of Well-Land mean to you?

Decided years ago to stop most of the Christmas 'stuff' – and was surprised (and pleased) by the positive response from family and friends.

How do you get the silence you need at these times?

Interesting to see the contrast between your colourful childhood stories about clothes and your adult non-story.

Any further thoughts on this?

And about your book ...

What were your hopes?

What does this mean about your own 'visibility'?

You seemed more honest than grumpy ...

At the end of this letter, I mentioned beginning to write my dissertation ... and getting stuck ... and my supervisor reminding me to look at 'the spaces between'. I told Alison: "*I'm looking for the 'spaces' in which to start writing about all the stories I've been so happily gathering ... it feels as though it's about finding silence as well.*" Shortly afterward, we agreed that her reply would be the end of our correspondence.

(Alison, 03.03.09)

Had my 65th birthday
a day to remember
because of snow snow and more snow

My grumpiness is still around
but ...

some wants and desires are emerging

Now really know
I want to do more singing
Regained some enthusiasm
for gardening

Being part of Well-Land
means being part of what's going on
not having to miss out on things
because of illness

Find it hard to keep people
especially family
at arm's length

Get the silence I need
by mostly living alone
but there's also
what goes on in my head

Ask myself
Does it matter how I look?
Isn't it too much effort?

With my previous book
all that visibility was great fun
very affirming
I've no idea where this one has gone
or who reads it

At the end of our correspondence, we had a series of email exchanges which seemed an important continuation of that exploration of meaning and the 'spaces' between us which has been an integral part of this co-researching with all the women involved.

I really enjoy your letters and your ability to reflect, occasionally chuck things back at me or choose not to go down an alleyway I've signposted, whilst coming up with a variety of stories, images and memories. So thank you, once again. (Christine, 15.02.09)

I felt quite – what did I feel? – reading that comment. How hypersensitive I am being! The little-girl Alison is saying: "I've tried my best". I mention this as it was a spontaneous reaction on my part ...

Writing today, I realise how hugely I've enjoyed being part of your dissertation research because it's given me the chance to be heard – by you – and possibly by others? A wonderful exercise in visibility and focusing on myself! (Alison, 03.03.09)

(various emails sent – including group ones – about other aspects of the correspondence)

Before ending this bit of the co-researching, I want to come back to ... what you called your 'hypersensitive' and 'little-girl Alison' response ...

Looking at what I said ... I hope it's OK if I more or less repeat it, adding that your 'best' has been not just very good but exactly what I wanted. I have really enjoyed your letters, your ability to articulate so fluently and in such a reflective way, and your honesty and strength in choosing which questions of mine you wanted to answer. I genuinely appreciate how you've done this and really did mean what I said at the very beginning [about choosing to answer or not answer questions] ...

Let me know if there is anything else we need to explore around this – or any lingering difficult feelings. (Christine, 13.04.09)

I want to say ... how much I appreciate your comments about my written contributions to your dissertation. I think the issue you raised about my 'little-girl response' is worth a bit more from me. (That's probably why I've been mulling over what you said since your email arrived earlier this week.)

I think the 'little girl' bit relates to me and my father and how difficult it was (and still is, though he's been dead nearly 20 years) to be my own person and do my own thing. Perhaps one of the ways I've coped with that has been working for other people and therefore pleasing them – and perhaps I've wanted to please you as part of that! So no hard feelings at this end – really!

(Alison, 18.04.09)



Cindy

*I love not knowing things
and exploring new places
and ideas*

(Cindy)

Cindy

by
Cindy

**I am a 53 years young professional
in California near San Francisco
A licensed narrative therapist**

**Student Advocate
a friendly name for therapist
in a large high school**

**Previously in computer industry
and construction**

**Part of a happy family
with two adopted Chinese girls
a lovely Italian/American wife
and our dog Marley**

**We are political
and we are busy!**

**Soccer
track and field meets
violin recitals
running and tennis lessons
working in the garden
making arts and crafts
school projects
meditating
lots of reading
homework
seeing and writing to friends**

**Typical family activities too
Lesbian families
can be just as boring
as anyone else!**

**Recently completed my EdD degree
and will return to surfing
and being a beach bum someday soon**

**(autobiographical details 'for publication' sent by Cindy, 19.05.09
after the end of our correspondence)**

Cindy and I met in November 2004 as 'new students' on our first three-day taught unit of the Narrative & Life Story Research EdD programme at Bristol University. I felt nervous and inadequate in the group of 16 – from various countries – who seemed at ease in this academic research world. Cindy appeared confident and was very articulate, though she later told me she, too, had felt nervous *"not knowing anyone or where I was ... I thought ... I can never keep up with these people."*

We both settled down and enjoyed this and subsequent units, attending all but one at the same time. I was always pleased to see Cindy's name on the list of students, enjoying her openness in the groups, her energy and engagement in debate and discussion – and her ability to think clearly despite the jet lag. As we got to know each other better, we began to share parts of our life stories in addition to those that emerged in group discussions during each narrative session.

She willingly engaged (by email) in 'conversations' for my Narrative Interviewing assignment (Bell, 2007): *"You are on – sounds like fun. I never get to be the interviewee."* After that we continued to correspond, our letters growing longer and more personal, with past and present stories, poems, thoughts, reflections, questions ... In my invitation to Cindy to take part in this co-research, I told her she seemed a natural choice *"if you don't mind being classed as an 'older woman'"* (she was then nearly 52).

Our correspondence makes me write – which makes me a better writer – so sure – I'll help with your project ... I get pushed around for being lesbian in a mixed race family but not so much because of my age – that I can tell. I'm not sure I'm a good fit for you, but I'm willing and happy to play.

(Cindy, 06.08.07)

So pleased that you're willing and happy to play ... this doesn't just have to be about age or about being pushed around ... it's much more to do with being a woman over 50 and going on being who you are, whatever that means and however you feel about it.

(Christine, 10.08.07)

(Cindy, July/August 2007)

Excited about being
in the old lady category!
Permission to be snippy

It's funny being grey
Don't feel old very often
though folks sometimes ask
Are these your grandchildren?

Always told I look young for my age
Maybe it's not true any more
Mentally don't feel any different
except perhaps a bit wiser
Physically there are a few clues

Still like to play and be silly
Often enjoy M's [partner] family
more than mine
Her mom's 90th birthday
celebrated with all the family and friends
They sure know how to throw a party!

Not sure the girls get the idea
of extended family

Moved in with Nonna
so she won't be lonely
Watching M reconnect
with childhood neighbourhood
Can't imagine those kind of roots

We moved so often
when I was a child
The oldest of five
and feel the responsibility at times

My parents are musicians
We seem to get along fine
as long as I'm 3000 miles away

Very Southern
polite
Conservative
racist
religious

Always wanted to be a parent
Had a complete hysterectomy
aged thirty

Have enjoyed young people
for as long as I can remember
an ability to connect
in a way many other adults cannot
believe it is my love of life

Come from a line of fisher people
Grandmother would take me deep sea fishing
Guess you could say
I'm a beach bum

M and I plan to spend
our golden years
looking for world's most perfect beach
Looking forward to our 18th anniversary
We make a good team
and cherish each other
It's the safest place I've ever found

After my dad died
and my mom remarried
the rules kept changing
my step dad
would not let us do anything
other than go to church on Sundays

How did you grow your back bone?

This confident loud person
is the opposite of what the
southern young lady
is supposed to be

This idea of women as visible
My feminist heart starts beating faster
just thinking about
how objectified women are
every day

Following our earlier correspondence, Cindy and I exchanged more than 20 letters each way, plus poems and other reflections, over the time she agreed to take part in this 'visible women' co-researching. We both roamed far and wide in our narrative responses and questions to each other ...

... so I have weaved together relevant sections from our correspondence over the period July 2007 to the end of 2008, rather than focusing on individual letters in date order.

(Christine, July/August 2007)

After colouring my hair for years, discovered it had pretty much gone white so cropped it very short and left it white ... a new me!

Part of becoming an older, still visible woman?

Just being by the sea is important to me ... looking, listening, swimming, walking along the cliffs and shore ...

Been doing morning yoga for years ... my body is more awake after.

You ask about home ... never really known what that is ... as much about people as place ...

How is it for you?

Interested to know more about adopting – and extended families.

My father was a distant person, even when there ... but many of my values (political and social - not religious) have been influenced by his. Helps me feel closer to him now than when he was alive.

About backbone ... possibly inherited? Always been independent, determined and stubborn, despite being shy and lacking confidence.

Falling in love again ... David and I met in our mid-fifties ... that will have to be a separate letter/story!

Enjoyed your and M's story ...

(Cindy, September/October 2007)

Preferred to be numb
for much of my youth
A wild child
living as much life as I could
Never thought I'd live past 35

Now I'm 52
a nice number

'Stuff' has never been that important to me
Finding ways to express myself
in music and words
has grown over the years
also 'being' more than doing

Directing my expressing to others
is about being able to connect
and being real about why
It's really scary
to give poems to people
you don't know very well

Still get very disappointed
when can't do the things
I used to physically
but appreciate now
being able to sit in meditation

Being 'out there' is easier
but I want to put a nice face on it!
Seem to be more aware
of how I look now
than when I was younger

L's [daughter] new teacher asked
"How are you all connected?"
and we calmly explained
she has two moms

I miss our old house
and am having to make adjustments
around living with Nonna
M is a strong person
*and we both feel better
when I stand up for me*

(Christine, September/October 2007)

A lot of silent longing and imagining things differently after my mother died. Later began to talk about her, even though nobody else wanted to – keeping her visible.

Did you do this with your dad?

Talking with the women in my singing group about our different ways of dealing with getting older ... the clothes we wear, expectations from others, choosing not to disappear ...

'Stuff' – and caring about it – was seen as immoral in my family. Went through a period of trying out most things 'bad' ...

Tell me more about 'being numb'.

Always ('selfishly') needed lots of time on my own – not so much unseen as not wanting to see or be with others. Not a very patient person ...

See we have our birthdays in the same month – two Virgos! Really enjoyed my 50s – when I properly came into my own.

Why didn't you think you'd live past 35?

Used to do a lot of letter writing and journaling – one of my ways of doing emotion.

In October, I told Cindy about being very affected by the suicide of a woman I had been mentoring as part of my work with an NHS team over three years. Her death came at a time of year I always find difficult, especially with the 60th anniversary of my mother's death in November.

(Cindy, November/December 2007)

Sorry life is throwing you
a curve ball right now
What do you typically do?

Had a big party for my dad
when I passed him in age
He was 35 when he died
I have the same blood disorder
so figured my time was limited too

Sending a separate piece
on my grandmother
We called her Granny Flash!
Encouraged me by her example

Would like to sing again
just don't have the time
Must get back to exercise routine

Life has been crazy
increased hours at school
more shopping and cooking
construction work on the house

Miss my house and neighbourhood but ...
the girls seem really happy
Nonna and I get along fine
She has a lot to teach me
I enjoy learning from her

Do have some time for myself
meditating while the toast is toasting
walking in the evening with M
or on my own listening to my ipod

Really appreciate our conversations
Never connected the dots
of capitalism and what they push on us
Often said retail therapy was fun
Whole new meaning for me now

Thought kicking women
was just a sexism/gender thing
Now see it's part of our consumerism

Cindy and I regularly sent each other writing drafts of academic papers, articles, poems, etc. for comment. Around this time she emailed a copy of her dissertation proposal and an abstract for her paper at the 2008 Qualitative Inquiry conference.

(Christine, November/December 2007)

Have personal rituals around my mother's death and her grave ...
gather pebbles from the beach ... sit and talk .. and weep ...
sometimes still angry with her for dying when I was so young.
Loved your grandmother stories – as you say, so fun and alive.

In your proposal, enjoyed the way you describe *how* you intend to
tell the stories about 'absent parents' ...

Are you going to say why as well?

Told J [supervisor] about feeling low - and very stuck with final
assignment. She suggested an un-assignment ...unblocked me!

Really enjoy singing – brings different parts of me alive. Sometimes
we 'busk' on the street for charity – very visible – can be a bit
frightening. *How could you find time for singing again?*

How are you surviving the 'craziness'?

Consumerist stuff makes me angry ... there are huge connections
between those pressures and how we feel about ourselves. Gender
politics seems to be *about* visibility/invisibility. 'Making a difference'
is really core to my being (though that can sound pretentious and
grandiose).

What would you say we're doing here?

(Cindy, January/February 2008)

Flew back for sister's 50th
and to put my eyes on my mom
all five of us 'kids' together again
I'm the bossy oldest
who moved away to the 'left coast'

Would never take the time
to reflect on my family
without your good questions

Not sure why my view of the world
is so different from the rest
Would like to give credit to my dad
who was kind to everyone
I know the 'box' is not for me

It works for me
our writing together
We are so different
yet share many of the same values
feel closer to you since we started

*The act of buying things
gives me a sense of power and control*
My mother is a 'shop-a-holic'
Nonna only spends if she must
M is so tight she squeaks when she walks

The house is now functional
Looking forward to sleeping in
and exercising every day
in my week off
SO busy at work
it's hard to fit in an 8-hour day!

I was so angry and lost at high school
hoping to keep that misery
from a few young people

First time I went to counselling
in my thirties
my mom sent me a get well card
every day for a month!

(Christine, January/February 2008)

Enjoyed your family stories ... and yes, I do see my two older brothers – more now – though lived different lives. Younger half-brother lives mostly in the US. I've always been the noisiest about my feelings!

Definitely know you better and feel closer since starting this. Sometimes need a space before replying ... bit like not answering the phone and listening to the message later.

Do you ever feel like that?

Aspects of 'visible women' seem to emerge from just about every part of all our conversations for this co-research.

How are things 'emerging' in your research?

Just had a couple of days in London, seeing the Louise Bourgeois exhibition ... she always has a big impact on me ... angry and determined not to disappear.

Do you know her work?

About to hand in my dissertation proposal – being self-indulgent and subjective is part of my criteria – copy attached.

Any comments when you have time.

(Cindy, March/April 2008)

An emergency call at work
from Nonna ...
In hospital
they discovered cancer

*Nonna died in her own room
with all three of her children*

REALLY glad we made the decision
to move down with her

Now everyone has left
Things are calming down
Makes room for the sadness
but glad to be back to some 'normal' time

Walking that fine line
of strength and humanness
*These are the times
I don't want to be a therapist*

Mostly don't want to do anything
Happy to sit
and watch movies all day
or just go stare at the ocean

Need to snap out of it!
Way too much to do
but no desire to do any of it
Difficult to manage
my work load at school
and no support or supervision

*Did missing your mom
play into your wildness as a youth?*
Missing my dad
added tons to mine

On the inside I feel so shy
constantly worried
about making a fool of myself
I like your saying I come across as friendly

Tell me more about self-indulgence

Seem to be writing in mosaic pieces
about 'absent parents'
different in colour and tone
not sure how they're connected

Attached please enjoy my poem to Nonna '*Are you ready?*'
I read it to her and M's oldest brother put it in her casket

(Christine, March/April 2008)

Your poem is very moving ... about Nonna and about you. Great to be celebrating her life – and taking care of others, but ...

Who says you need to snap out of it?

What about going gently?

Maybe just staring at the ocean is what you need to do.

Basically I'm a shy and introverted person ... always worked hard to present myself as confident ... fooled lots of people, just like you did!

What are the really positive things your dad gave you?

It's great telling my story to people who really listen – and don't therap!

Sounds like you get this from M –

and also did from Nonna?

Spending a lot of time on 'visible women' writing and reading ... will be hard to stop 'gathering' ... appreciate your enthusiastic engagement.

How is your mosaic doing?

Do you really need 'glue'?

Self-indulgence ... well, it's as a positive rather than negative concept ... setting my own criteria, being subjective, not pretending to be objective, allowing my own biases and opinions to count ...

What does self-indulgence mean to you?

(Cindy, May-July 2008)

Returned to meditating daily
before anything else
Seems to help make more room
Feel more aware of things
that push me around

Back to exercising
so all around I feel better
Got to the beach in April
spent some time staring at the water

Hard for me not to follow the rules
but am going to 'indulge' myself more
and see where it goes!
M and Nonna been great listeners
and I learn lots about myself
forming answers to your questions

Some of my dissertation stories
are like shards
ragged ... incomplete ...
but you're right
I don't need any glue!

Presenting some of it at QI [conference]
was actually fun this time
and received wonderful feedback

Planning on graduating
next summer
We've already planned the trip
for the whole family

Now M is working hard
on getting us ready
for our month in China

Cindy and family spent four weeks in June/July re-visiting the two orphanages and the areas where their two Chinese daughters originally came from. From her 'China files':

"We've come a long way for this visit ... it's an effort to help [daughters] have more of their story ... before they were part of our lives. We are looking for pieces of their story in these places and with these people."

David and I spent two weeks in the US in July at a big family celebration for my cousin Sara's 50th wedding anniversary. There were many exchanges of chatty emails between Cindy and me before and after our travels.

Once back from China, Cindy and family started preparing to move back to their old house and neighbourhood, which they had all missed whilst living with Nonna.

The time change from China is really hard – plus we were on the go so much over there that I think we were worn out! Right now we are packing and working on the house ... for our return ...

We are planning our wedding right now ... just need to get married again before the election in case the vote goes against us ...

I have so much to say and so much to share – it's overwhelming ...

(Cindy, 03.08.08)

Thought you might like some of the writing I did in China ... [China files]

We are moved in – more than less and it's wonderful to be home. I sleep SO much better ...

(Cindy, 26.08.08)

I LOVE your China writings ... a sensitivity of language that felt very appropriate to your emotional story ... Your writing has changed over the time I have been reading your stuff – it seems like you're allowing more of yourself to be in there, which I like a lot ...

How are you feeling about our letter writing? ...

(Christine, 26.08.08)

I do want to continue our conversation. I love writing to you and I love hearing from you. I find it really helpful. It keeps me in my writing mind and your questions help me see things differently, or something you've said gives me new ideas to consider.

(Cindy, 26.08.08)

(Cindy, September-November 2008)

Lost all our earlier letters
and thanks so much for re-sending
Each time a batch arrives
it's like a visit from a friend

We had to get remarried
because the State of California
cancelled the last time

We had a complete blast!
Fun to have so many people
from different areas of our lives
to celebrate together

My upbringing was so negative
about pleasures
that it still feels like self-indulgence
hanging out with friends

Been having the best time
playing with the photos from China

Can't wait to finish writing up my research
Still so much to do
I'm up to 25 different stories
*Always want to do
more than I have time to do*

Been having these 'Foucault moments'
about how power is constructed
by our languaging

*I'd like to get to a place
where I could capture
some of the unworded times*

Writing about my mom
and the times in my life
she has been completely absent
even though she's still living

Been nice to connect
with the rest of the 'visible women'
How did you find
such a nice group of women?

(Christine, September-November 2008)

Really enjoying the various 'group' emails and pleased to see such strong responses to your 'what to wear as an older woman' at your wedding.

Hope you get to stay married this time ... *great photos!*

Also amazing photos from China ... and your 'voice' comes through so clearly in your journaling ...

Has this helped with your dissertation writing?

Enjoyed the seminar in Bristol ... Jean Clandinin saying stories aren't smooth, there are cracks and borderlines – spaces in-between.

We seem to have been exploring lots of these ... ?

About the vegetable growing – a horrible summer has made it even more hard work, but I still get enormous pleasure from it – very therapeutic.

Tell me more about your 'tales from the garden'.

Cindy and I continued – still continue – to write email letters to each other, though we agreed in early 2009 that these were now for ourselves rather than my co-research. Exploring with her the 'cracks' and spaces between has contributed enormously to my delight in this journey.

Her (and my) 'tales from the garden' became very much part of our letter-writing as she completed her dissertation and discovered the delights (and disappointments) of vegetable growing: "... think I might have put my tomato plants out too early. Who knows ... M keeps saying – did you research this?!?!?! Oh well – either way it's fun!" (Cindy, 07.04.09).

I've so much enjoyed this part of the research that I'm reluctant to stop, but am sure that you and I will continue to correspond anyway ... thank you so much for your fascinating and enthusiastic contributions over such a long time ...

(Christine, 13.04.09)

Yes, I'm very glad to keep writing with/to you ... just returned to work after our Spring Break ... and I feel SO much better and well rested ... The garden is coming along ...

(Cindy, 20.04.09)

At the end of April 2009, Cindy came to Bristol for her viva, which she 'passed' with flying colours. I was able to join her and Jane, our supervisor, for a celebration afterwards – and she flew back to California the following day.

LOTS of congratulations again and I loved reading your whole thesis on my journey home today – sitting on the train (and the bus) with the occasional tear in my eye ... delightful to be able to spend time with you both yesterday ...

(Christine, 01.05.09)

I'm still about 10 feet off the ground and I'm loving the smile on my face that has yet to fade ... what a perfect way to celebrate! ... Thank you for coming so far out of your way to see me ... made me feel very special.

(Cindy, 03.05.09)



Marie

*I am big and untidy
as are my belongings*

(Marie)

Marie

by
Marie

Current age 70
Born Chelmsford 1938

Father steel contractor
Mother employed by Bata shoes
and then taught flower arranging
a domestic goddess of the old school

Grammar school education
where I managed to attain
the lowest maths marks ever
in my first year exams

University of Essex degree
in Linguistics

A short spell with Which? magazine
then employed in the NHS
from 1973 to retirement in 2004

Moved from London to Bath
and became an observer of folk

Married 1960 to R - marine engineer
Divorced 1984
Two sons
A married with two children
D married with no children

Likes
theatre - language - film
West Ham - England cricket matches
Tom Stoppard plays and the U3A poetry group

Dislikes
craft work and driving (because I can't)
fruit salad for pudding
people who don't listen
(because sometimes I don't)
and long conversations on the telephone

(autobiographical details 'for publication' sent by Marie, 18.04.09
after the end of our correspondence)

Marie and I met in the 1990s when we were both working within the NHS in south-east London. At the many seemingly endless meetings we both attended, I greatly appreciated her ability to listen, straightforward and 'sensible' way of talking, obvious deep intelligence and sense of humour. We got to know each other better through our involvement in a programme to support French GPs coming to work in London.

In 2005, after her retirement, Marie decided to move from her flat on the outskirts of London to a house in a Georgian 'college' in Bath built specifically for "*single ladies in reduced circumstances, without male support*". As she said, this was "*the potted version of the original criteria*".

After agreeing to take part in my co-research, Marie responded to my query in January 2008 as to whether she was ready to start the 'conversation':

I expended my remaining energy organising a party for Partis on New Year's Eve. We had quizzes and pass the parcel, Call My Bluff and charades. What larks – 20 old gals making a last pitch at glamour with dangly ear-rings and high heels. We could have made the Bath Chronicle ...

I am conscious of being a visible woman ... probably not at my most creative but if you outline again what you need and when I will do my very best.

(Marie, 08.01.08)

I sent her my 'opening letter' in mid-January.

I find my thoughts and reflections come easier in a journal/diary format when writing and I hope to get some initial response to you soon. We can then discuss whether it works or not, or if there is a better way of doing it.

(Marie, 29.01.08)

Your thoughts in any form are totally acceptable!

(Christine, 01.02.08)

(Marie, February/March 2008)

Resident in Georgian almshouses
close to the city of Bath
with twenty five ladies
from 60 to 88

*Visible behaviour
is not actively encouraged*

We are viewed as an entity
Expectations are not greatly different
from inception over 150 years ago

Our chaplain is 83
He and the handyman
are the only male presence
entitled to regular visits
and unquestioned access to our homes

We are the 'Partis ladies'
we get invited in groups
to local events

*Most of the time
I feel institutionalised*

Our only constant link
is that we are no longer
or never have been
married
paradoxically a key concept
in the loss of perceived individuality

As a single woman
the proximity of family
was appealing
in my decision to move
*offering a semblance of family unity
and freedom in retirement*

The past year
was not a time for complacency
S my daughter-in-law
diagnosed with advanced lung cancer
*Within hours
the ground had shifted*

S talks of her hopes and fears
for her children
and answers their questions
as best she can
They are laying down memories
and building blocks

I understand the role
she wants me to play
should I outlive her

Approaching 70

I am not sure if I am capable

Sometimes ashamed
of the despair I feel
thinking of the impact
of the loss on her young children

Where it matters

I am visible

My presence makes a difference
to these four lives

I no longer turn heads
but on a good day
feel I have a voice
the most enduring quality of all

(Christine, 10.04.08)

Your description of your life at the college was wonderful ...like Austen, funny and poignant ... though can't see you being a 'Partis lady'!

What's it like being 'viewed as an entity' ... who by?

How do you maintain your own sense of identity?

Tell me more about feeling institutionalised ...

What you write about S – and your own feelings – is very moving.

Perhaps you're feeling the despair S can't/won't?

If you can/want to, tell me about your despair ...

Your presence and voice – and your ability to listen – is a vital part of how you are all learning to live with and make visible what's happening.

You referred to my childhood experience ... only after I reached the age my mother was when she died (40) did I let myself wonder what it was like for her, slowly dying, with three young children she wouldn't see grow up ... it was never spoken of in my family – never a chance to learn to live with the loss – to 'lay down memories' – just a black, silent hole.

We spoke on the phone occasionally about the impact of S's illness and Marie's concerns for the children (then aged 3 and 5). She was also worried about not fulfilling her 'obligations' to me and sent a card by post, with her next letter:

I hope I am not proving to be a bad choice – couldn't bear not to come up with the goods for you ... I value what you are doing and most of all your patient friendship ... I find it excruciating to spill my thoughts on paper, thus the formality of the attached. Maybe it's a melting down process and no. 3 might reveal the sinews softening!

(Marie, May 2008)

(Marie, 28.05.08)

Things with S's condition
are so much better at the moment
I am taking a step back
Reshuffling my priorities
focusing on what it is I want to do

Partis might be more Cranford
than Jane Austen

*Suppose I conform
because that was part of the deal*
Our benefactor laid down 'rules'
to last a life time
She wanted the best place
for the less fortunate to live
when women were dependent
on male relatives for survival

Have lived here
as long as I attended university
but am still bewildered by my surroundings
and think I have learned little

Not inviting friends to visit because
I do not regard this as my home
thus not adding to our experiences together
both in physical and emotional terms
I do care about that very much

Some identities are being maintained
but we find it difficult to understand
the terms of engagement
even between ourselves
Knowing how to be is complex

Conversing or not becomes significant
Seeking inspiration from a book
with some fascinating insights
about the energy of connecting through language

My 70th birthday came and went
A feeling of absolute unreality
Celebrated on the river
in a narrow boat
with eighteen family and friends

(Christine, 02.07.08)

I certainly don't find you a 'bad choice' – quite the opposite – you write so well, and I hope you will find it other things as well as excruciating ... as you know, I enjoy spilling my thoughts on paper.

Tell me more about what's difficult for you.

How are you starting to reshuffle your priorities?

What you don't seem to have lost is your very clear individuality – or your sense of humour.

How have you managed to retain these?

Does writing about it help that energetic connecting?

What are your needs around 'home'?

I wonder what your friends' reactions are to your sense of not adding to shared experiences with them ... sounds like a real loss for you ...

Have you had any 'feedback' from friends?

An interesting comparison of the time spent at university and Partis! Find it hard to believe you've 'learned little' – doesn't sound like that.

Did you find university bewildering?

I didn't go to university but emigrated to Australia instead, aged 20 – and learned loads – some of it not what I wanted to learn!

Because of the difficulties and demands of Marie's family situation, there were frequent gaps in our correspondence. We discussed the possibility of her withdrawing from this co-research and agreed she would continue to write as and when she felt able to do so.

(Marie, 29.08.08)

A valedictory letter from Bath
Leaving three years to the day
from first taking residence

*Did not bring me the tranquillity
I thought I was looking for*
Felt myself gradually fading into the landscape
of these impressive grounds

Surprisingly
Eros has shot a couple of bows
alas missing me
but striking two of our kind
I watch in wonderment
the transformations that have taken place
in these women
Out - proud - and extremely visible

*Feel my own sense of freedom
in my plans to move*

Chosen to live
in the heart of the village
where A [son] and family are
to be on hand in emergencies
and feel in control of my own life

I want to pare down 70 years of living
the shrugging off of many memories
Find it interesting to think of
beautiful table linen that my mother left
soon to absorb other conversations

Try not to anticipate the future
for my son and grandchildren
but if I have any influence at all
I want them to have some fun

In the past three years
have become fractionally more creative
with using my time
and involving others

Plan to celebrate my departure
with a party
Some of the most reticent
have expressed regret at my going
One told me of her 'devastation' at the news

So I am puffed up
with a strange sort of bemused pride
I am an Essex girl after all
in culture and approach
a long long way
from the world of Austen gentility

In late August, Marie agreed to be part of the 'group' emailing: *"I think contact with others (as you say short-term) a good idea and will round things up in that I am sure we all had different experiences about how we felt writing about ourselves ..."*

She negotiated a short lease on a (very small) flat and moved in mid-September. We had little contact for some weeks while she worked out new routines with her son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. Her internet connection was also problematic and we agreed that I would not send another letter until she was ready.

(Christine, 23.10.08)

Your move sounds a very brave thing to have done ... and I'm interested in the experience of paring down ... all that 'shrugging off' of memories ... and the 'devastation' for others of your leaving.

What difference do you think you made to their lives?

How do you feel about yourself where you now are?

I enjoyed your telling about K [3 year old grand-daughter] and her wanting to be 'a different sort of girl' ...

and wonder how are you getting on with being a 'different sort of grandmother' ...

In December it was discovered that Marie's daughter-in-law needed yet more treatment and we again had contact only through occasional phone calls. At the end of January she sent me her fourth (and what turned out to be final) letter, saying "... *never feel it's quite fit for purpose but trust you completely to pick and mix at will.*"

(Marie, 28.01.09)

Writing this looking over
a Camberwick Green view
set in Cotswold stone

It is a welcoming place for newcomers
with neighbours locating me
as 'living in Roger's flat'
which is bright clean and small
*I am big and untidy
as are my belongings*

I am still living out of boxes ...
Not convinced I have achieved
very much of what I set out to do

*Felt I could make a positive difference
to the lives of my grandchildren*
but it is important to their parents
that things follow a routine pattern
for as long as possible

There is little scope for general discussion
or for differences of opinion

For my part
I have to question my self-appointed role
as overseer of the family's wellbeing

Other family members have become
confidantes of choice
ostensibly to save me 'the worry'
because I am alone
*I am filled with a primal surge of rage
when I hear this*

I hear them agonising
over possible guardians
and Wills being amended

It is exhausting and messy
but is the backdrop to our lives

*Accept that I have been trying too hard
and it is not within my power
to make things as I would have them
nor should it be*

*I will be available if called upon
but am no longer hovering
on the outskirts of responsibility*

Where and what next I don't know

*Thank you so much for this, including your howls of rage – it all sounds traumatic
and is obviously taking its toll on you ... want to say how much I appreciate your
sharing all this with me in your own very particular and impressive style.*

(Christine, 28.01.09)

We exchanged emails during February, as Marie decided whether to stay or go once her six months' lease at the flat ended. During this time we agreed by phone that the main letter-writing part of our co-research had come to an end, though we would continue to send potentially relevant emails that could be included, in addition to the occasional 'group' correspondence.

*After much time spent deliberating and scouring for alternative accommodation I
have accepted an invitation to take up residence once more at Partis College. I
know, I know, but times and situations change and this has become not only the devil
I know but offers a good house on the south side of the college at an affordable rent
and a bit of sun at the back.*

(Marie, 25.02.09)

Marie moved back to Bath and 'the cloisters' in March and we met there in early April 2009.

It was so good to see you again – a triumph of visibility in the cloisters! ... As you know, I'm now at the stage (sadly) of bringing to an end the letter-writing stage of this project, as I move into 'writing up' (or down as the case may be). I'll really miss doing it, as I've been in love with my research and don't want to let it go. Thank you so much for your wonderful contribution ...

(Christine, 13.04.09)

... as little as I contributed, I too feel a sense of loss to think I didn't ask you any questions at all and just wanted to get out the starched tablecloth and move the best china around on the page. Which does reflect on the topic of 'academic writing'. It took me three full years to meet the requirements at Essex but then the door slammed shut and I couldn't get out.

I don't know if I will ever be able to just let words and thoughts flow anymore without censure but I did want to say that 'your writing' in place of 'dissertation' captures the essence – you only ever do your writing, without self-conscious adornments or jargonese, and I so look forward to reading the final version ...

(Marie, 15.04.09)



Sara

It feels great to be this age ...

So much more free

than I've ever been before

(Sara)

Sara

by
Sara

I'm 68 now
Can't believe the years go by so quickly!

We live in an old house we rebuilt ourselves
in Middleburg
a small town in Florida

I'm a doll and puppet maker
and sell my work in our shops
at Renaissance Festivals
around the country

Between times here
we go to Texas for two months
then upstate New York
Pennsylvania
Louisiana
then start all over again

It certainly never gets boring
and with our nice big travel-trailer
home is always right behind us!

The travel helps us stay in close contact
with our three children
eleven grandchildren
and four great-grandchildren

It really has been an interesting life!
Being born during an air-raid
in the middle of a war
does tend to set things up

I was supposed to arrive in London
but the bombing was so bad
my mother went to stay
with family in Bridport
which promptly got bombed

My father went to India
after evacuation from Dunkirk
and apart from a few days at home
never returned to live with us

My younger brother and I thought
he'd taken one look at us
and decided we just weren't good enough

My mother went out to work
my brother went to prep school
and I went to live with maternal grandparents
over their shop in London
until I was 14

Met R my American sailor boy
the love of my life
and we got married
aged 17 and 18
MUCH TOO YOUNG (everyone said)

Went to live in the US
and I followed R's squadron around
with the children (as they arrived)
until we found this wonderful house

R was at sea much of the time
until he retired and said
"It's your turn now"
and I started my small business
He builds the shops
and keeps our vehicles on the road

Celebrated our 50th anniversary
last year
with many of our large extended family

It's such a great time now
working as and when and where I want
being with different parts of the family

There have been some really hard times
and sad times
but don't think I'd want to change it

I feel very fortunate to have all this

(autobiographical details 'for publication' sent by Sara, 12.06.09
after the end of our correspondence)

Sara and I are cousins, our fathers the youngest and oldest of three siblings. The older brother and sister went on to become missionaries, like their parents. Sara's father, the tall, handsome, charming 'black sheep', deserted his family after leaving the army at the end of World War II to live in Australia with his second wife – and was never spoken of.

Sara grew up in Crowthorne and London, where her two sets of grandparents lived. She was born and spent a few months in the small town where I now live (and spent part of my childhood) and our families occasionally met during school holidays. We never had the opportunity to become close but got 'news' of each other via family letters. When she and R married, I was 16 and living in Trinidad and we had not seen each other for some years.

We finally met again after 40 years, in 1995 when I went to visit her and R (and her rather demanding mother, who has since died) in Florida. Since then, we have become 'sisterly friends', with a few visits back and forth and many, many email letters and family stories exchanged. We have offered each other warm support via letter at various difficult times for us both; especially painful for Sara was when her younger brother, who lived in Australia, took his own life in 2004.

Her family in the US have been – and continue to be - central to everything Sara has done over the past 50 years and she is at the heart of a large and extended network of in-laws, grandchildren, step-grandchildren and now great-grandchildren. She was fascinated by my ideas around visible women and enthusiastically took part (with Cindy) in 'conversations' for my pre-dissertation un-assignment.

I'll be glad to be your willing victim! Just let me know what you need and I'll pitch in.
(Sara, 07.08.07)

I'm delighted you're prepared to be a willing victim ... and am attaching something [first letter] to start the process off ...
(Christine, 09.09.07)

(Sara, September/October 2007)

It feels great to be this age
So much more free than I've ever been
Can really come and go as I please

Always set my own goals
With R at sea so much
had to make my own decisions
about everything

One thing that is weird ...
sometimes a person
usually younger
will walk towards me
*and look right through me
as if I'm not there!*

Nice to have lots of family
in one's life
but sometimes also nice
not to be responsible for them all

I really like being a great-grandmother
Involves holding and admiring babies
Being pleased with lop-sided cup cakes
and scribbly drawings
No work involved ... lovely!

Feel like escaping sometimes
away from all responsibilities
but ... there are only so many days
in a lifetime
and I don't want to waste any of them
Too many things I want to do yet

I like doing Renaissance Festivals
such an interesting group of people
artizans and entertainers
choosing to live 'under the radar'

Enjoy being 'mother hen'
to some of the very young women
living on their own
A shoulder to lean on
or a bit of comforting

People were quick to say
I was much too young to marry at 17
After 50 years
guess I knew what I was doing!

When I first came to America
was pretty lost and scared
and had to work things out for myself
Being pregnant put a stop to getting a job
and didn't have many qualifications

I've always sewed
Nanna had been a dressmaker
and taught me when I was 5
Made all my own clothes
then clothes for the children
and toys as they grew up

The local historical society
asked me to make period costume dolls
Started selling them at craft shows
and ventured out more and more
as the kids needed me less
and R retired

It was good to branch out a bit
I felt smothered much of the time
as Mother became ill
and very dependent on me

I'm happy making dolls
very rewarding
inventing and creating new ones
and running my little shops
with some of the family involved

Really fun to be enjoying
a grown-up relationship with the children
there's companionship
not conflict
in how we work together

Sara and R travel around the US for much of the year, often with family members of various ages, as they camp at the different Renaissance Festivals, meet friends and sell her dolls and puppets. She is sometimes out of email contact for a while and the frequency of our correspondence has depended on internet connections as well as time available.

Between September 2007 and March 2009 we sent 12 'visible women' letters each way – Sara's often written in what she described as 'episodes' over a period of weeks – and these have been stitched together to form the fabric of our conversations.

(Christine, October/November 2007)

Very interested in your enjoying being a 'universal mother figure' and how good you are at this!

Seems very much part of your 'visibility' ...

Did you know you wanted to be a mother?

Not having been much mothered, was never sure I could do it – or even wanted to – and was surprised by the power of my feelings for G [son].

Your mother seemed a very strong woman – interesting but formidable, and extremely visible! I see you as strong and independent in a different way – including inventing a career for yourself.

What's it been like, becoming successful in this way?

I found it strange, especially after becoming self-employed, selling a 'talent' for something ... but also learned I enjoyed being 'on show', despite my basic shyness.

Do you enjoy this 'public' part of what you do?

(Sara, November/December 2007)

Visibility
seems to have something to do
with those who 'see'
being somewhat respectful of others

It sticks with one
not having a parent around
I think having strong women
around early in my life
helped me to stand on my own two feet
*Perhaps I'm just passing on
the love and support I was given*

My mother was a strong woman
which stood her in good stead
when our father dumped her
but she was also very domineering
and wanted all the attention on her

As the children left home
and she came to live with us
I began to feel
almost invisible and unreal
as if I had no place in the world

Realise I unconsciously decided
to invent a career then
in order to have an area
where I could participate and thrive

Having people take my work
home with them
says that I'm a real person

Have a hard time
staying put in one place
so going to the Festivals is perfect!

Enjoy creating, displaying and selling
all part of being visible

R is happy that I'm happy
as long as we're home
every few months for a while
We certainly never get bored!

(Christine, January 2008)

Loved hearing how you made yourself visible again through your work – it must have taken a lot of courage to get out there at first.

Do you still find that difficult?

How did you and R work out the 'transition' when he retired?

You mention being more 'in control' when you're working and needing your own space. That's very important to me, too.

What does it mean to you?

You seem to be very good at 'keeping going' even when things are tough – another thing we share!

Where do you think that comes from, for you?

Agree about the importance of having strong women around ... we shared an amazingly feisty grandmother ...and aunt.

I remember you as a child seeming very confident and sure of yourself.

What are your memories of how you felt then?

Never felt 'good enough' for my father – or seen as myself – so was constantly trying to be something/someone else. My brothers say the same.

What was your experience of this?

(Sara, January 2008)

Perhaps 'keeping going'
is a visible act?
Giving up would mean
just fading into the background

Creating things with my hands
makes me feel visible and alive
More in control
*not just doing something
someone else wants me to do*

Frustrating with my mother
feeling I was the child again
taking orders from her
but having to take care of her too

Don't think I felt confident as a child
Though got all the mothering I needed
from Nanna
and was happy with her and Grandad
*Only saw my father
four times in my life*

R has been a good father
though away so much
Thought he would be bored silly
when retired from the navy
but he's made a visible place for himself
at home and at the Festivals

(Christine, February 2008)

Been thinking about the 'keeping going' and wonder if sometimes it's a way of hiding – *an avoidance of being really seen?* I've done that ... trying to be 'superwoman' ...

another Bell woman trait perhaps?!

Appreciating all your family stories – learning so much more about you and what happened in all those years we didn't know each other.

Sara and R organised a series of family celebrations for their 50th wedding anniversary in July 2008 during the Sterling Renaissance Festival in upstate New York. It felt important to be there – to celebrate and to meet more of this family I didn't know.

Sara emailed in February: *"I'm so happy you're planning to join us this summer."*

(Sara, February/March 2008)

I wonder why some people
want to 'hide'
Afraid of being themselves
or not knowing who they really are?

Think my brother *had begun to feel*
his life had lost its meaning
We used to talk on the phone
but he seemed disconnected from everyone

Wish I'd known you
when you really needed support
hard not to try to be 'superwoman'
It's scary when there's no one to count on
but yourself

Not sure what kept me going
Learned to cope
by just doing
Tend to be methodical
learning to trust one's own strength

When R and I met
we knew almost instantly
He was exactly what I wanted
and we've made a good team

Some of our children's life choices
have been very challenging
but decided we could do no less
than allow them to choose
just like we did

Started this in February at a Festival in Four Winds (Texas)
camping on a horse ranch in the cold and wind
Ended in March with SNOW!!! but at least the wind has stopped

(Christine, April/May 2008)

About 'hiding' ... for me it was about not being able to bear (or imagine anybody else could) my own difficult feelings ... being unacceptable ... it's a very lonely place ... becomes important to just 'get on with it' ...

Agree it would be lovely to be able to sit down and talk about our family history ... though don't think I know any more than you ... we seem to have had some amazing – and very visible – women ... so let's include ourselves in that band!

How did you know that R was what you wanted?

You seem to have done such a good job with your children and all their families – and become this 'matriarch' and mother to everybody.

How do you see yourself in that family role?

Really looking forward to seeing for myself ... !

(Sara, April/May 2008)

*I like your thoughts
on why people hide themselves*
Understanding behaviour
is so important ...

Thinking about a former daughter-in-law
exceptionally neat and tidy
but she never paid any bills
mountains of paperwork
kept in a locked desk

R and I met so young
and by chance
We weren't looking

Sounds weird now
but there was never an idea
that we would ever part
*even the times over the years
when we didn't much like each other*

The idea that we
have caused this huge family
to come into being
is amazing and exciting!

I so enjoy
being Sara - Mum - Granny
to them all
Can't wait for you to meet
at least some of them this summer

The women of this family
on all sides
are a group of very visible people

When we started this correspondence
I believed that my visibility was
at best ... fading ...

*Now it seems
I just wasn't really looking*

Feel much more validated

Can't tell you how delighted I am to hear what you say about your own visibility ... very validating for me, too. Started this without knowing where it was going to take me (which I believe is what research should be about) ... and been learning what a wide variety of personal definitions there are of visibility/invisibility. Older women so often seem to have gone along with the 'myth' of becoming unimportant, no longer counting or being seen – by themselves as well as others.

Sounds like with your 'business' self and your many roles within the family and elsewhere, you've found your own way of being – who and what and how you want to be ... Does this make sense to you?

(Christine, 23.05.08)

(Sara, June 2008)

Isn't it interesting
how little we know of those around us?
*People keep all sorts of things
to themselves*

Used to hate having to tell my mother
something I knew she wouldn't like
She was very vocal when displeased!

Tend to go 'off with the fairies'
sometimes
drifting about
in a bit of a fantasy world
when I have an idea for a project
and need to work it out
So I forget to put the dinner on!

Still find myself rather invisible
in some situations
*but am learning to ignore
those who ignore me*
instead of worrying about it

Your idea of finding one's own space
and knowing who and what one is
makes perfect sense to me

Thanks for telling me
so much of your story
about falling in love with the 'wrong' men
I don't think anyone knows
what love really is at first
how it feels
what it looks like

Hope we can find some time
to tell some more of our stories
while you're here

It's going to be
an amazing summer
So many family are coming
We'll have a bunch of babies to play with!

(Christine, July/August 2008)

What can I say? What a WONDERFUL party – or series of parties. You really pulled it off! ... so much enjoyed meeting so many of the family ... it did my heart good to see so much fun going on ... and you and R looking so relaxed and loving and happy ... lots of photos to remind me ... Still feel a bit tearful every time I think about saying goodbye to you ...

(email 25.07.08)

Writing this two weeks after leaving the party ... still feeling emotional ... it was really hard to say goodbye to you ...

Feels like through our stories we've become differently visible to each other?

In my family it seemed like everything was hidden – not spoken about.

How does it work in your huge extended family?

Grew up with a need to be OK whatever happened – a sort of inner strength. Often wanted to disappear as a child ... being depressed was like a way of escaping ... a place inside where nobody could go but me.

In August I started asking all the women how they felt about having some 'group' contact in order to share their experiences of this co-research. Sara's response was: "Yes, you can share my email address with any of the group. I'd love to correspond with your other participants."

(Sara, September-December 2008)

We had such fun at the 'do' in Sterling
even though we got pretty knackered
what with all the partying!
Everything we wanted it to be

Expect I have a much higher opinion
of my helping powers
than the kids/grandkids do!
Became so used to looking after the children
that wasn't sure what my role would be
as they grew up and moved out

Then with my mother
insisting I was there all the time
felt trapped in the role of care-giver
sort of became invisible

When I left England with R
was so excited to be escaping
the life she had planned for me
I wasn't even sad

It was extraordinarily difficult
to talk about P [brother]
for the first couple of years
after he took his life
Still hard to think about him
I wonder why it still feels so raw?

Didn't know you got depressed
You seem an amazingly strong woman
can't imagine you as an 'invisible person'
So interesting learning about you and your life
and sharing some of mine

Tend to drift off
when thinking up new ideas
scribbling or sketching or just thinking
like lying on one's back in the grass
watching the clouds
when we were kids

Really enjoy writing episodic letters
no rush to get it done in one go
can take my time writing each bit

(Christine, October 2008-January 2009)

Love your episodic letters – they seem very ‘immediate’ and chatty and I can hear your voice coming through. Email can be a wonderful thing!

So good getting to know you differently through this. Have the sense of both re-discovering the cousin I knew slightly (and was a bit in awe of) and becoming a sort of sisterly-friend in the present. Recognising the strength in each other has been part of this ...

What a lot you did for your mother ... *did you become resentful?*

What was the life she had planned for you?

I’ve sometimes allowed myself to wonder what it would have been like if my mother had lived and turned out not to be so wonderful after all ...

Really like the sound of your ‘drifting’ ...

Tell me more about this ‘place’ you go for your ideas and inspirations.

Glad you’ve found it helpful (if difficult) to ‘talk’ to me about P’s death ... we go on missing people ... don’t believe in ‘getting over’ death and grief ... they remain as part of us and our experience and we’re changed by it.

Perhaps your rawness is partly connected to the way in which he chose to take his life and how that impacted on all his family?

Noticed that both our letters are getting longer ... it’s quite difficult to stop writing once I get going ... beginning to move toward the time when the ‘co-research’ correspondence will need to end, but look forward to our chats continuing.

(Sara, February/March 2009)

Always enjoy writing to you
makes me think about
what I'm saying!

Just had an opportunity
to buy two acres of overgrown woodland
next to our place
May borrow a goat
and it's firewood for years!

Love this place to come back to
but moving around
never has bothered me
Neither of us wanted to stay in one place

We were both lucky
to have good grandparents

Don't think Mother ever planned
to 'let me go'
Thought I'd always be there
ready to do whatever she wanted

She made it clear
I couldn't expect
to be able to come home again

P and I didn't spend much time together
but were always really close
I'm sure Mother loved us
but she liked us better
when we weren't there

Wonder if my ongoing sadness
is partly because P was the last
of my 'original' family?
I'm the only one left

It's so nice to fill in the bits of our history
as we go along
It's difficult to stop writing to you

I enjoy it very much
even though it takes me forever
to get finished!

I'm about to send out a brief letter to all of you, individually, letting you know that I'm now at the stage where the 'research phase' letter-writing is coming to an end ... However I'd really love to keep writing with you as part of our ongoing getting-to-know-each-other thing ... so hope you're up for that!

I so much enjoy your letters and thank you for all that you've contributed so far.

(Christine, 13.04.09)

I certainly plan on staying in touch and 'chatting' with you ... this is such fun exploring oneself and all the people who surround one ... though it sometimes takes me an age or I can't get an internet connection, it's great that I can just take my time writing ... Look forward to reading all our stories when you've finished!

(Sara, 13.04.09)



Jane

*The ways I now feel visible
in the world
are so incredibly comfortable*

(Jane)

Jane

by
Jane

I am 61 years old
and living very happily
with my civil partner N
in a house in Hampshire

Retired early
from a very busy and demanding
professional job
having been part of the health professions
most of my working life

Most of this time
spent operating out of my left brain

After being fortunate enough
to spend some months
in a Retreat Centre in the US Mid-West
I found my right brain again
which opened a whole new world!

Found a love affair with fabric ...
and stained glass fascinated me ...
so retiring early
has given me the time and space
to develop my self-taught fabric creativity

Now call myself a fabric artist
and create large wall hangings
like stained glass

I also enjoy
more earthy and ethnic pieces
which honour my South African origins

(autobiographical details 'for publication' sent by Jane, 17.04.09
after the end of our correspondence)

Jane and I met as students in 1993 on an innovative and experientially-taught MSc programme, Change Agent Skills & Strategies, with the Human Potential Research Group at Surrey University. Jane, who lived within relatively easy commuting distance of the university, very kindly offered me accommodation during the five-day taught modules each month. We grew to know a lot about each other, both during the intensive experiential group sessions and the evenings spent reflecting together on the day (usually whilst knocking back large quantities of red wine) in our very different ways.

She was then in a high profile, very stressful post in the health professions and experiencing severe back problems. Shortly after the end of the MSc programme, she decided to take early retirement on medical grounds and concentrate on developing other aspects of her life and interests. This has included various stays at Rockhaven, a creative retreat centre in the US, where she eventually met her American partner.

We have maintained contact over the years and I have followed her transition from stressed executive to creative fabric artist and loving partner with great delight.

I was wondering if you now feel ready to engage with my visible/invisible women project? ... My ideas, of course, keep changing, but then that's part of why I'm doing this ... It feels all kinds of things, including exciting and challenging – and I'm planning quite a lot of colourin'-in!

(Christine, 02.01.08)

We seem to have a fairly busy time planned – it just sort of happened! ... Yes of course I can endeavour to engage in your project – just make it simple and remember I'm a bear of very little brain!!

(Jane, 05.01.08)

Many thanks for saying you're ready to have a go ... and as for the bear of little brain, I shall just ignore that one! ... I'm attaching my first letter and can only repeat the 'no rules' bit in it – which is that you can answer or not answer the questions I've asked – you may well have better ones you'd rather write about ...

(Christine, 07.01.08)

(Jane, 18.01.08)

Just coming up to my 60th birthday
and life is great
Better than it's ever been
A clear sense of 'this is who I am'

N and I got 'married' last September
One is not meant to use that term
but for me that's what we did
and I refer to N as my wife

Our lives revolve
around friends in the UK and US
all people who accept us as a partnership

HUGE differences in my life now
Since retiring 12 years ago
creativity has been an important aspect
I opened to another part of me
my right brain
which had been rather under-used

Now a fabric artist
Fabric and colour really excite me
an enormous change from my career
in nursing and midwifery

I loved the job I had
AND it was the most demanding ever
Retiring early
felt like the end of the world
at the time

The stress was a contributory factor
to my intractable back condition
Experienced a lot of anger
about how this was dealt with
Physical pain was part of my life
until having major reconstructive surgery
after retiring

Also gifted myself with retreat time
looking at making changes
to conditioning from a childhood background
of emotional and physical abuse
Witness to extreme parental violence

Always aware of feeling more comfortable
with women
but did not come to terms with my sexuality
until I was 50 years old

Now feel freer than I ever have

(Christine, 14.02.08)

So many things in your letter I could ask questions about ...

What does 'married' and 'wife' mean to you particularly?

We talked very freely about so many things during the times I
stayed with you, yet it seemed difficult to even broach the subject
of sexuality.

What is your memory of that?

What you say about both physical and emotional pain reminds me
of how much you have coped with over the years.

How did you learn to 'accommodate' pain?

What turned this into 'fighting' for what you needed?

You seemed like quite an angry person a lot of the time – not
towards me but about work and certain people. Perhaps I
recognised it because of my own anger, which was bursting out in
all kinds of ways (maybe inappropriately, but wonderfully
energising!) ...

How would you now describe being 'visible' in the world?

What's different from your eminent, professional self?

(Jane, 26.02.08)

Married means intentional commitment
and it's really important
to have equal choice
living together legitimately here
is good visible stuff

The 'wife' bit is another choice
a term of endearment
and not a definition

As a child I just closed down
in order to survive
Asked to be sent to boarding school
and it was one of the happiest times
in a beautiful peaceful location
surrounded by love from the nuns

Hated going 'home' for the holidays
and came to England
two days after leaving school

Had a lack of identity
outside my professional role
and had to learn
that the world didn't stop
when I stopped being 'somebody'

It was difficult to separate
my professional from my private life

I was reluctant to own who I was
and very frightened
of inviting disapproval

Being visible in the world now
feels incredibly comfortable
Happier as I approach 60
than I ever have been before

Your comments and questions are helpful
and also very insightful and interesting

Have attached a few bits and pieces [poems]
and photos of some of my work

(Christine, 13.03.08)

I loved the photos of your work – and you – and the way N 'got' you with all your bracelets on full display, your colourful clothing alongside the colours of your 'window' ...

Tell me more about your excitement around colour ...

Your poem is very telling about the deepness and darkness of your pain. I was often tempted to ask you more at that time, but didn't.

What made you so sure about 'visible commitment' to N?

Your story about discovering being 'just Jane' and not your role in the world sounds like a very important milestone ... reminds me of learning to see myself during my 'magic summer' ...

What was it like, not being rejected for just being you?

We really enjoyed the party [Jane's 60th] and it was lovely to meet some of your friends and family, as well as seeing you two ensconced at [home] ... I know you're off again at the beginning of next month, more flashing around the globe etc., so don't feel any pressure around writing again ...

(Christine, 13.03.08)

... thought you might like some of the party pictures – we so loved having you with us to celebrate. Have also included a picture of the finished window [a fabric 'stained glass'] which is now hung in the stairwell where the African hanging used to be ...

(Jane, 29.03.08)

(Jane, 24.04.08)

Not being rejected for just being 'me'
was like being given
the best present I didn't know I wanted

Remembering an image
of myself totally surrounded
by a wall of thick ice
*Fear of it melting
and people might get to see me*

Hadn't even thought
of making this sort of commitment before
Very quickly an incredible degree
of 'comfortableness' with N
as though we'd known each other for years

Saw this American 'dream house'
in Defiance (wonderful name!)
Later that night
realised it wasn't the house
It was N that was the dream

My love of fabric
is about being able to FEEL the colour
I'm in a different place
cushioned by the colour
Enormously happy ...
Time disappears ...

Learned to love sewing as a child
Didn't do much painting and drawing
My younger brother and sister
were far more artistic than me

Just been out to South Africa again
and loved reconnecting
to African art
the expansive country
and delighting in the strong bright colours
of the big tropical flowers growing wild

(Christine, 27.05.08)

Being seen as 'just' you ...

What's it like now, this being visible to others?

'Comfortableness' doesn't seem a word you would use often or lightly

... *What does it mean to you?*

Really enjoyed your reflections on my questions about your love of fabric and colour ... the supportiveness of that 'cushioned' place ... your delight in reconnecting with the vividness of the colours in South Africa.

How does it feel when you return?

You said N had not been out of the US before you met. As a very independent person, used to whizzing about the world, doing your own thing ...

How is it different now for you, travelling and living with somebody else ?

As I get further into this 'visible women' correspondence – and more fascinated by all that's emerging – am finding my own letters and responses are taking much longer to write ... having to be very strict in editing whilst still allowing myself to go off on the odd tangent, as there's always learning there!

There was so much I could follow up in your last letter... really appreciated your sending both the photo of your first window and your reflections on it ... fascinating ...

(Christine, 27.05.08)

(Jane, 21.07.08)

This being visible to others
is so incredibly freeing
*So different not having to hide ...
from myself more than anything*

'Comfortableness'
means sort of wrap around
supportive
holding and snug

*Learning to trust my own intuition
in a more visible way*

It finally dawned on me
how much more meaningful
good people are
than material things!

N has been here a year
and we have been working through
sharing space and life together

We *found* each other
and also need individual space
within what was 'my' house
in order not to *lose* our sense of self

When we got back from the US last time
N had to settle in again
Now we both want some time here
quietly being at home

Really delight in returning to England
looking down on the patchwork quilt
of every possible green
Enjoy the differences
in the four seasons
not just raining or sunshine

Jane regularly gave me positive feedback about taking part in this co-research. At the end of the letter above she said:

"It has been such a good experience being one of your 'visible women' – your incredible insights and questions/challenges have been very helpful and thought provoking. So I want to thank you – all very revealing."

(Christine, 26.08.08)

About 'intuitive knowing', had a sense of your trying this out for 'fit' in the MSc group (all those years ago!) – but your work and other pressures seemed to make it difficult then.

How does it work for you now?

All that travelling ... and coming back home again ...

How is the space-sharing/settling back in going?

Thank you for your feedback. Delighted you're finding this such a positive 'visible' experience ... imagine it also has a lot to do with your no longer hiding from yourself ... which seems to lead to not needing to hide from others ...?

(Jane, 29.09.08)

Was beginning to 'try out'
trusting my intuition
all those years ago!
Difficult given my fears
about what the effects might be

At Rockhaven
had the chance to experiment
in a safe place without recrimination
The whole place
was about being real

Still took some time
to come to terms
with the whole sexuality bit
and be visible

Who would have thought
it would take until I was 50
to 'come out'
with a bunch of nuns in the woods!!

*Continuing to make this space
more ours than mine*

Finding a way to create
different workspaces
is going really well
and it's made a big difference
for us both

As promised a photo of my latest 'window'
Chinese design of cranes and pine trees
to do with longevity

(Christine, 25.10.08)

Enjoyed your 'coming out with a bunch of nuns in the woods'!

Can you tell me more about what the 'being real' (and not being real) means to you?

Very interested in how you're working out the (literal) space-sharing between you and N – and also what it means in the way of those spaces around, between and within ...

What are your experiences/thoughts on this?

When I feel intruded on (physically, psychologically, emotionally) get a sense of being disregarded ...beginning to disappear ... tend to withdraw in order to get some inner space ... in order to stay 'visible' to myself.

Now have a Russian doll theory of visibility ... Lynn has lent me hers (all seven of them) which I can play with and see how neatly and cleverly they fit, one inside the other ... lots of different ways of being seen ...

Your Chinese crane 'window' is beautiful – elegant arrangement of shapes and colours ...

Thanks for asking about how I'm going to 'pull all this together' for my dissertation ... have a sort of map in my head but no doubt the journey will be different! ... bit like not knowing if the world IS round but planning a round-the-world exploration anyway – all the time slightly anxious that I might fall off the edge.

(Christine, 25.10.08)

(Jane, 21.12.08)

Being real
means being free
 to express an opinion that is mine
not having to think
about trying to act
in a way that is going to please

Goes right back to the mother
and needing to do it right
A lesson very well learned!

Started to do it differently
without recrimination ...
The sky didn't fall in
 and I just got braver and braver!

Withdraw when my 'expression space'
is reduced
Feel frustrated
which can come out as anger
or going all quiet
 which is like going invisible

Became aware of inner conflict
about having created this space
and it being mine

Needed to move my vision
to look at things through N's eyes
to understand what was difficult for her

A lot of work on both parts
about our different needs
and it's now so very comfortable

Loved your 'round-the-world-exploration'
My mind went back to that time
you and I sat overlooking the sea in Cadaque
using the 'edge' to metaphorically throw over stuff
we didn't need or were finished with

Jane also loved my Russian doll theory of visibility: *"I have a little one ... all in slightly different clothes which seems very liberating ... If I can find it, will let you have it."* Some weeks later a little package arrived with a note: *"At last have gotten into the attic and found this ... which I would love you to have. I actually bought her in St Petersburg."* There are five little dolls, the smallest of which is only 2cm high. They sit on the windowsill, just behind my laptop.

After being ill with a virulent chest infection for most of January 2009 and doing almost no writing at all, I began negotiating the ending of this part of our co-research with those who were still corresponding.

*It was a delight opening the package and discovering the little Babushkas ...
A lovely memory of our throwing 'stuff' over the edge – do you remember that
Apollinaire poem? Went something like:*

*Come to the edge, he said
They said, we are afraid
Come to the edge, he said
They came
he pushed them
and they flew*

*I have so much wonderful material from letters and other gifts ... am still LOVING
gathering the stories and writing the letters ... but was beginning to wonder if I
could ever turn it into a dissertation and how on earth to do this ...*

*My latest tutorial helped me get back to feeling connected to why I'm doing this –
and finding some spaces to put away (not throw away) the bits I won't need for this
particular task ... [supervisor] suggested I get back to leaf gathering (as with my un-
assignment) rather than trying to plant whole trees ...*

*So here I am 'leaf gathering' ... paying attention to the spaces between me and you
and how we have communicated within them ... not trying to fill the spaces but
allowing them to be visible ... Any thoughts, comments, questions would be very
welcome!*

(Christine, 12.02.09)

(Jane, 02.03.09)

The Apollinaire poem
is a wonderfully simple thing
to refer back to
when we need a shove
AND with the positive outcome of flying

Loved the bit about leaf gathering
rather than tree planting

ALLOWING VISIBILITY
rather than
FILLING SPACES

I really understand this
Stepping back
to wait
for a spontaneous kind of happening
or 'filling'

Used to feel
that only one 'layer' of me
was seen and heard
Have spent the past few years
reaching other deeper 'real me' layers

I am learning
how to really share this space
to keep seeing it through N's eyes

This is a permanent thing
we have entered into
and each of us
needs our own areas of creativity

The resulting comfort
is about physical and mental space
to be separately when we want to

In the early part of 2009 there were various exchanges of emails within the group as I asked for feedback on some of my ideas about the language for writing this narrative dissertation. Jane's response was typically robust and positive (see 'Writing in Visible Language' above).

Thanks so much – this is wonderfully supportive! ...

*I will send another 'group' email shortly, but as you know, I shall reluctantly need to come to the end of exchanging letters with you and my other co-researchers ...
I have SO MANY stories ... could go on doing it for ever! ...*

I have so much enjoyed receiving and sending letters and thank you once again for your wonderful contribution so far.

(Christine, 25.03.09)

Glad you feel so supported by us all! Don't get lost in all the stories – it sounds pretty overwhelming.

(Jane, 27.03.09)

The Visible Group

*I believe ... we have connections
that cannot be investigated
but have to be relied on.*

(Munro, 1985: 193)

Talking amongst ourselves

Dear co-researchers

Firstly, thank you all very much for agreeing to give brief 'group feedback' ...

I've really been enjoying the conversations, questions, occasional photos, poems and other delights over the past months ... [and wanted] to offer you all the opportunity to give some feedback within the email group about your experience of being part of this VISIBLE WOMEN exploration ... to look at what's been happening in the spaces between us.

Just to reassure everybody again - this can be as brief as you want to make it, both in length and frequency. The names and email addresses of the seven of you who have taken part are above ...

Here are a couple of what one of you called my 'deceptively simple' questions for starters:

a) What learning (if any) has there been for you in being asked questions, thinking, writing about this issue of becoming an 'older women' - both personal and in a more general sense?

b) Has it felt like a 'conversation' of sorts? If so, have you felt free to question, comment, reflect on both sides of the conversation? If not, how else have you experienced it?

If any of you want to give a bit of brief biographical detail (or other relevant story!) when replying, please do - and I'd also like to invite you to ask a question of the group (which may or may not get answered, of course).

Over to you ...

(Christine, first group email to all seven women, 04.09.08)

Hello ...

A) I've learned a lot from your questions and my answers. As an older woman ... I am far more confident and very cynical ... find most of the women I meet over a certain age rather stuck ... They've lost the joy of life and have forgotten how to play (if they ever knew!). Whereas others ... have changed enormously and yet still know how to play. I also feel that most of us have made the decision to grab back our own power. We have been lucky enough to live in a time of peace (relatively speaking) so our energies can be directed on ourselves, perhaps!!!! ... whatever it is I'm glad to be alive and have pink hair.

B) Yes. Your emails have been a conversation. With your amazing insight encouraging reflection I have felt as if I've done some therapy ... With the amount of waffle I've thrown at you I'm astounded you can make sense of it let alone use it! ...

C) My question to the group is: Would you like to make contact? ... I feel it may be fun, with Christine as one of us, of course.

(Lynn, 17.09.08)

Hi Christine (and the group)

A) It has been fascinating to engage with you like this because I don't usually go in for self analysis. I'd also never considered whether I was a "Visible or invisible" older woman, so it was fun doing some research of my own (reading, internet, asking friends) and finding what a complicated issue it was. Some of my younger female (and male) friends actually said they felt "invisible" so it doesn't seem to be age or gender specific.

Our correspondence made me realise that I don't feel invisible and your careful questioning ... made me evaluate why that might be. I think I'm just lucky to have been born with an optimistic, easy going outlook to parents who loved each other and me ...

I'm extremely fortunate because I'm still doing a useful job that I enjoy, working only the hours I want with enough money (just!) to do what I want, when I want, with my brain still functioning and with enough good relationships.

I think financial independence and good friends help prevent women of any age from feeling powerless and invisible.

B) Our correspondence has felt like a "conversation" ... Your comments have always been interesting and moved the discussion on and I've learnt a lot of things about myself - and you - that would not have been possible in "ordinary" conversation.

C) Lynn's suggestion of continuing with a group contact sounds great - but I'm sorry ... my time is limited. I'm already a member of two online Study Groups so will have to say no. But I am looking forward to reading your finished dissertation ...

(Pat, 19.09.08)

Hello everyone –

I'm Sara, the cousin in America. I've so enjoyed this correspondence with Christine; we weren't in close touch with each other for years and have now established a lovely close friendship that I really treasure.

I've thought about the questions she's posed, they've been interesting and insightful and I've discovered that I'm a lot more "visible" than I thought I was. I have learned about the family from whom I've been separated for 50 years - and want to learn so much more. I've learned about myself, too, and the surprisingly large family that my husband and I have helped to create. It's been an interesting journey - I hope it doesn't end too soon!

I hope I hear from some of you other participants about your experiences with this project.

(Sara, 21.09.08)

Hello Everyone

Thanks to Lynn, Pat and Sara for their input already. My reply will be pretty brief – mainly, I think, because, though I’ve enjoyed participating in the research, I’m not sure how much energy I’ve got to write more!

I worked with Christine at King’s College ... for several years where we facilitated groups for GPs. I’m nearly 65; live alone on a quiet’ish council estate in South London, I still do some paid work, and I’m a Buddhist (have ‘taken refuge’ in June). I’m also a writer, researcher and counsellor – or was. ‘Was’ because work is dwindling and that’s my main preoccupation at the moment as I don’t feel ready for the loss of identity, role (and income) from being a worker!

This is a transitional time of life and being involved with Christine’s research has helped me think through some issues in a more structured way – though still struggling with the next steps. The back and forth emailing of letters has been brilliant. When Christine asked me to participate, I panicked – assuming it would involve being interviewed.

I’ve enjoyed the wide-ranging discussions - covering everything from clothes, singing, working, travelling, falling over, etc .etc. It’s also been lovely to get to know more about Christine!

Greetings to everyone

(Alison, 22.09.08)

Hi Christine and the other Visible Women

Thanks for your inputs - have enjoyed getting to know a little about the others in the Group.

I too have enjoyed the contact and the learning from Christine's incredibly insightful questions. I believe a really big learning for me has been the acknowledgement of how visible I am - much more so than 12 years ago when I first had the pleasure of beginning a friendship with Christine. We were on a Masters degree course at Surrey University at which time I was in a very high powered and pressured professional job in London. I've now been retired for 12 years although was just 60 this year. I live in Hampshire and have developed an alternative life as a fabric artist, have been doing some facilitation at a Spiritual Retreat Centre in the Midwest in the USA and have recently had a Civil Partnership with a wonderful American woman who I met at the Retreat Centre!

The exchange of letters with Christine has been a great conversation and her questions are brilliant and helpful - I've really had to think and tap into deeper places which has been so constructive and enlightening.

I too will need to decline the offer of continuing group contact. The idea does sound good, but like Alison I'm running short of writing energy at the moment. I am also a Trustee on two Charities which is demanding a lot of input at the moment. Am so looking forward to reading the finished dissertation too - how you 'sew all this info. altogether'.

Greetings and warm wishes to all the Group.

(Jane, 24.09.08)

Dear Visible Women

It's very nice to hear from all of you - and it's always wonderful to converse with Christine over email.

I'm delighted to hear so many of you are too busy to email back and forth - to me that means you are having fun somewhere else ... I'm a bit crazed at the moment - time wise that is - but something came up yesterday that was very visible about older women's invisibility.

I'm getting married next month - to a beautiful woman I have been sharing my life with over the last 19 years. We have two adopted children. Thanks to the Supreme Court of the State of California we can now legally marry. One of our close family friends decided that she would host our wedding at her house - and she's making a big party of it! Yeah! I love to dance! But ---- What to wear!?!?!

So I started looking around and it's very difficult to decide or know ... I turned to M last night and said - I don't like any of the clothing I see on TV - I keep looking, hoping to see something that would look nice on me. Her reply - 'Cindy - they don't have women our age on TV!' And she's so right - never realized that I never see anyone my age on the shows we sometimes watch. How silly of me!

On the other hand most women my age have enough sense to stay away from TV all together! So I guess I get to make up my own look for the wedding ...

So - enjoy yourselves - and I'll write again soon I hope.

Best to all

(Cindy, 25.09.08)

Cindy's story about visible outfits for her and M's wedding sparked responses to (and from) her; these seemed a relevant part of the group conversation and it was agreed that individual responses could be shared unless requested otherwise.

Hello Cindy, Sara here

I enjoyed reading your email about your upcoming wedding. Congratulations and best wishes to you and your partner, I hope your union becomes even more special with the wedding ceremony making it "official" ... You are so right about women of "a certain age" not being seen on the telly, whether they're wearing plain or fancy outfits! ...

I'm really enjoying this group contact, it's fun to finally have a chat with some of you.

My husband and I travel around the country quite a bit; I'm a doll and puppet maker and sell my work at our shops in various Renaissance Festivals - Florida, New York, Pennsylvania, Louisiana and Texas. The travel helps us stay in close contact with our children, grands and great-grands.

Best to all

(Sara, 27.09.08)

Thanks so much for the good wishes, Sara

I did find a fun outfit ... I had a friend go shopping with me and her directives were really helpful ... makes me look better without looking trendy as if I was younger than I am ...

Since I've followed a life long path of not fitting in ... embracing my "otherness", it was wonderful just to see how put together I could look without going to the dark side!

Interesting process, which we are still in the middle of - now we have to dress the girls, 9 and 12, and find that same balance ... In the stores it's VERY hard to find dresses and nice clothes that don't look like grown up cocktail dresses or revealing hooker clothes...

Anyway - thanks for your kind reply and I look forward to hearing more from the group.

(Cindy, 29.09.08)

Hi Cindy, Jane here from the UK

I was so thrilled to hear about your wedding plans and hope by now you have found some wonderfully expressive outfit to wear. I really understand how exciting this all is for both of you having married my wonderful woman last year. We've just had our first anniversary. We got married here in England although it is called a civil partnership here but gives us complete equality with marriage 'rights'.

I know it is now legal in California and a couple of other States in the USA but do keep up the pressure wherever you can to get Federal gay marriage. My wife is American but because I'm British and same sex she had to leave the US in order for us to be together. Same sex marriage in the US - in the States where it is legal - is not permissible for immigration purposes, so it precluded us ... We so wanted to live in the US but it is just not possible ... Anyway we are very happily married here and are so thankful that it was possible to be so in England.

*I so hope your day is really happy and I'm sure you'll look amazing. I had similar problems to you and ended up making my own silver jacket for the occasion!
Have a wonderful wedding.*

(Jane, 29.09.08)

Way fun – thanks!

(Cindy, 29.09.08)

Dear all

The emails that have been flowing have been so free and easy considering we have never met, which is probably due to the tact and integrity of our leader.

I met Christine 13 years ago when we were training in psychotherapy. We sat across the room staring at one another for a while. I love her humour, humility, intelligence, irreverence and general being.

Christine's doctorate has given me much to think about and I've discovered a few things about myself I didn't know. I'm enjoying being my age (64) ... It is so nice not to worry about so many things any more and to be able to think, feel and do what I want and not what I think I ought to be doing. I am not working any more (as a therapist) as I became very disenchanted with a lot of that world. Or I grew up !! Or I was cured !!

I am quite good at playing and your emails, and my answering of them, seems rather like a wonderful sharing game.

Cindy - Good luck in your marriage and a wonderful day.

Sara - Congratulations on fifty years.

If I go on it will be wittering ...

(Lynn, 07.10.08)

Hello Lynn, thanks for your good wishes about our special day.

It was such a wonderful occasion ... just what R and I wanted, a time with as many of the family as could be there, talking, playing, eating, laughing, being together ...

I've so enjoyed re-connecting with Christine; we were separated by distance and the circumstances of our lives for many years and now we're re-discovering so many things about each other and the family.

That's one reason I've enjoyed participating in this research project, it's been an opportunity to think about who and what I've been and become over the years and how events have shaped the lives of our family.

I'm still working - sort of! ... It's a lot of fun and so far has been reasonably profitable ... At least life is always interesting!

Hope we can keep up this world-wide chat, it's fun.

(Sara, 08.10.08)

Most of the women were still corresponding individually with me at that time. The group emails continued occasionally, usually prompted by a request of some kind from me.

Subject: Naming the visible women

I'm just beginning to do some 'writing up' for my dissertation ...

I want to ask how you would like to be identified in the final text. There are various possibilities ... if you have other ideas I'd be delighted to hear them:

- a) your actual first name*
- b) a pseudonym (choosing your own, of course)*
- c) just an initial letter*
- d) 'your' colour*

There doesn't have to be general agreement ... you can each be identified in the way you choose. When you've had a chance to think about this, let me know what you'd prefer ...

(Christine, 23.10.08)

I received brief individual replies from all the women saying it was fine to use their own names – and with a couple of suggestions for their 'colours'. Marie had been unable to join in the group 'forum' but sent a brief message to me saying she hoped "to come on board soon".

Cindy sent a slightly longer group response:

Hi Christine, and everyone else

I've been thinking about this most of the day and I think my name is a fine way to go.

I know this is a good ethical question and a way to protect folks from ??? Feeling taken advantage of? Not being honoured? Not being consulted about what Christine will and will not use? I'm at a loss right this minute about what I would need protection from.

Can we talk about it? I don't want to be the only one that's not a colour!

(Cindy, 23.10.08)

Cindy's point about the ethical question of 'protection' is a very valid one - though I hope none of you do/will feel that I'm going to either take advantage of you or not honour what you're all contributing. I will certainly consult with all of you about what I will be using and you will all be given the chance to read whatever goes in about you.

I've already said all this, but maybe it's a good time to repeat it! Anyway, over to any of you who would like to join in a conversation about this ...

(Christine, 24.10.08)

I wrote individually to all the women, adding in a group email:

*Thank you all very much for agreeing to my using your own name in my writing.
This is very affirming (for me) of your all trusting me sufficiently – at least I hope
that's what it is!*

...

*I'm currently experiencing a form of writer's block as I begin to get into trying to
write the first chapters for my dissertation ... I think it's partly resistance to moving
from sharing and gathering stories with you all (which I continue to LOVE doing)
into the more 'tasky' academic stuff.*

(Christine, 26.11.08)

Dear Visibles

How are you all? In Devon it's dank cold windy and wet ...

My colour (as a Visible) is a rather lovely mustard/sludgy colour. I have sludge colour eyes so it probably enhances them!!

It has been a busy year for some of us (not for me) so you are, perhaps, just coming up for air. My most interesting experience this year was to go to Canada and meet up with my cousin J (she is 77 yrs old) who I haven't seen for 52 years. Her morals, priorities, manner and character and looks were my Mother!!!!!! This was both lovely and disconcerting. As in most families there were idiosyncratic rules... and J still uses them. I only use some but was fascinated that I still recognised and knew them It takes so much energy to keep all the rules going and I fell by the wayside years ago.

Write soon. I'm sending this through our dear leader without whom we would not be a gang of formidable Visibles.

(Lynn, 25.11.08)

... a message to everybody from Lynn. Not quite sure about being what she calls the 'dear leader' (various rather unpleasant dictators come to mind) – but then maybe that's very appropriate! Anyway – any comments – responses – etc. welcome.

(Christine, 26.11.08)

I love the idea that we as a group (as well as individually) are "The Visibles"!! ... I do know that I really feel more "visible" and more affirmed as such since we all started this journey together - and that includes our fearless leader! ...

... I have had a busy year - most of them are, with a large family ...

*My colour is gold, which I love, since it was our golden wedding anniversary year
....*

*We're in Louisiana at the moment ... chillier this year but still lots of sun most days
... getting ready for Thanksgiving Day ... It's fun cooking big meals when the
family's all together and we do have so much to be thankful for, especially this year,
with a son-in-law returned home safe from Afghanistan, a new great-grandchild,
born just a week ago, the rest of the family safe and well - what a year!*

Happy Thanksgiving to you all, wherever you are –

(Sara, 26.11.08)

There were positive individual responses to the idea of being "The Visibles" but no more group contact until my letter - and their responses - about language in March 2009 (see 'Writing in Visible Language' above).

In April I sent the final 'group letter', attaching the Germaine Greer quote (above) on the "positive aspects of being a frightening old woman":

You may be pleased (and/or surprised) to hear that I've now really got going on the dreaded dissertation (though calling it 'my writing' in order not to frighten myself too much!). I haven't started on all your stories yet, but have written various introductory 'leaves', about why I'm doing this, what I'm doing and how I'm using writing with you all as research.

I promise not to bombard you with endless drafts, but have just come across a good quote from Germaine Greer, who I both admire and sometimes want to throw things at. Hope you enjoy it, too.

(Christine, 10.04.09)

I think this is absolutely bril.

(Jane, 10.04.09)

Brava!

(Cindy, 10.04.09)

Thanks – I love it!

(Alison, 11.04.09)

I really enjoyed the quote, thank you for sending it.

I'm glad you're getting on all right with 'gathering your leaves' and beginning your writing ...

(Sara, 11.04.09)

The quote from G. Greer is brilliant. I find it so liberating to be this age and not care what most people think.

(Lynn, 13.04.09)

Postscript

Writing is not complete

until the reader has responded ...

(McIntyre, 2008)

Afterwords ...

After writing each story, I sent a copy to the 'owner' for comment and/or correction. To my amazement (and slightly tearful delight), apart from a few overlooked spelling mistakes, there were no requests to alter anything.

(Lynn, 30.08.09)

I like it
makes me sound
quite intelligent

You were
delicate
tactful
sensitive

(Pat, 05.10.09)

Enjoyed reading my story
and loved the layout

Looks like you have done
an enormous amount of work

(Alison, 22.10.09)

Been sitting and reading
the 'Alison' section

Am so very impressed
by the way you've written this ...
what a wonderful original approach

I hope you are 'well pleased'

Strange reading what I've written
Had to keep reminding myself
that is what I wrote then
Sometimes a wish to edit
but only when writing about
feeling miserable or grumpy

(Cindy, 27.10.09)

Really enjoyable
to see our words intermingled
Said as much about you
as about me
Was it like that for others?

Like a mini flashback
to all major events in my life
in the last five years
So much happened!
To see it all gathered together
is amazing

I love that you have been
on this passage with me
and that herstories
provided the 'salt'

Surprised by how much
I've shared with you
how much of my life
documented

Really appreciate
how you have turned
the letters into prose
Your spacing and timing
and different line breaks
make the words really sing

Found it comforting
respectful
loving
that we checked in
with each other
about continuing
our email conversations

(Marie, 31.10.09)

The form portrays
perfectly
the fragments of a life
which is not sure
where it's going
and which hovers
on the ethereal side
of visibility!

Thank you
for the respectful way
you treated
my tightly wrung out musing

Am truly sorry
I could not bring myself
to say more at the time

(Jane, 15.11.09)

How you extract
these poignant things
I just don't know!
You are amazing

It sounds great
and I can't wait to see
the whole thing in context
when you've finished

(Sara, 20.11.09)

SO enjoyed reading it

Makes me sound
a lot more together
than I sometimes feel!

R says it does sound like me
and he's known me
longer than anyone

Thank you for allowing me
to take part in your project
It was a great experience
and very interesting



Christine

Almost there

Christmas 2009

My story – part five: still on a journey ...

*... oh, if only I were sometimes
you and you were me*

(Fisk, 2008)

Reading through
with a critical eye
editing ... re-writing ...
needing to end

Wondering ...
how did I get here?
from there

A year ago
almost to the day
“I haven’t yet written
even a fragment
of a chapter”

Arriving here
with all these stories
committed (that’s the word)
to the page
as though they matter
makes that so
for me
and for ‘my’ women

They tell me
they feel more visible
in unexpected ways
and they all
want to read
all this

That
is the best part
of this exciting
sometimes terrifying
journey

Writing to be heard
as well as seen

(Christine, 18.02.10)

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